THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E.

NUMBER 13

The Cross of Gold Affair

A chess ie a play, a silver ass and Portable and a deadly case lead Nick and Illya to a Indian DRESS girl for world power in this action-packed U.N.C.L.E. adventure by Fredric Brown

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THE CROSS OF GOLD AFFAIR

Fredric Davies

The clown leered at the slender puppet-girl. His caperings rang silvered bells, and he spoke.

“My sorrow, my love, is that the world understands me, and what the world understands, it despises.” Her eyes followed his expectantly, waiting for release. He laughed at her, deciding to leave her in her doll’s posture. He capered away, tinkling, jingling with every gesture.

“And now, my friends,” he departed from the play, “do gather round, for ‘tis time to broach the wine.” He mimed a long drink. “The price, pray good sirs, do not mind the cost, for at twenty-two and ten I’ll buy all day.” He glanced again at the girl and laughed at the anger showing in her eyes.

“But perhaps you are right to think of price, for wine may come dear. At twenty-two and ten I’ll buy all right, but at twenty-two and twelve-I’d rather sell than buy, good sirs. Aye, twenty-two and twelve is much too high, for this Medoc white. So send it back. Aye, sell the lot and refuse to buy. And why?-why, because a birdie told me so. Aye, a birdie, and who but a fool or two would refuse such sound advice?”

The clown prepared to continue, his facile mind forming new monologue. Suddenly the puppet came to life. Acting as if she had received a cue, the girl pirouetted across the stage, paused to remark, “Poor fool!” and exited.

Alain, the actor-clown, was enraged. How dare she? How dare she? he silently stormed as his capering and prancing won back the audience’s attention.

A tall, tanned young man chose that moment to leave. The quiet exit from his orchestra seat went unnoticed by all but Alain.

They can’t do that. They know they’re not to leave until the final curtain. His rage grew to encompass both of his enemies.

Somehow he finished out the scene. Even without the doll-girl as a foil he managed to retrieve the thread of the play. The final curtain came down to more applause than the play, or the players, deserved. Alain stepped back into the wings, bowing, smiling, and looking for the girl who played the dancing puppet. He would flay her flesh.

He found them together, outside the dressing rooms, the puppet-girl and the tanned young man. Some inner cunning warned him not to push too soon. Instead of wrath he turned a clownish smile on them both.

“Introduce us, Jenny luv,” he addressed the girl. Somewhat coldly she replied.

“Kim, this is the Great Alain.” Her accenting of “Great” was almost sarcasm. “And this, Alain, is Charles Kimberly-Phelps.” Then, with more warmth: “If you’ll excuse me, Kim, I’ll change and be right back.”

“And what do you think of my play, Mr.-er, Phillips was it?” asked Alain as he stepped into his own dressing room.

“Phelps,” he was corrected with a smile. “Kimberly-Phelps. I was puzzled by it rather.” Kim paused to take in the collection of photos clustered around the mirror. All of Alain, all markedly posed. The odor of old clothes and greasepaint filled the room.

The clown moved to his dressing table, and peeled off one eyebrow. “Puzzled?” he said to the reflection in the mirror. “My dear chap, is that why you left so early?”

Alain was ready to start his flaying. Reaching for the cleansing cream, he caught the reflection of Kimberly-Phelps leaning forward. The young man’s jacket had fallen open, and nestled at his shoulder was a luger-like U.N.C.L.E. Special. Alain felt a stab of fear.

“Not really, but now that you’ve mentioned it, what was that nonsense about the Medoc white? You couldn’t have been serious, and yet, Lord

knows, no one seemed to be laughing." Kimberly-Phelps continued to explore the dressing room.

"Nothing at all, just lines in the play."

"Jenny told me you were ad-libbing, though. Was it a rib, or what?"

Alain's clever fingers removed the rubber nose. As he wiped away half of his face of red and white, he spun to reveal the blue steel of a weapon hidden till then. Two bullets ripped into the U.N.C.L.E. agent's stomach.

Conditioned response put his U.N.C.L.E. Special into Kim's hand. A mercy bullet tore open Alain's cheek as the agent slumped to the cluttered floor. The clown's half-real, half-fantasy face tried to show both pathos and amazement at once. The mercy bullet took effect and he slumped, unconscious, into the paints and creams before the mirror.

The U.N.C.L.E. agent pulled out his communicator, thumbed it urgently, and whispered with dwindling strength, "Open Channel L, please. Emergency, open Channel L. I've been gut-shot."

The world started to disappear, just as the beautiful puppet-girl ran into the room. She saw her courtier fade as the small radio replied, "Channel L is open." The girl took in the two still forms, the blood, and the repeated words, "Channel L is open; come in, please. Channel L is open." As she bent over the communicator, she did everything she could to stifle a scream of terror.

Chapter 1

“An Arctic Oil Source.”

Napoleon Solo swept his rented Corvette Sting-Ray off the West Side Elevated into the mismated streets of Greenwich Village. The tall brunette sitting beside him looked bored.

“We aren’t going slumming, are we, Napoleon?” she asked with a touch of the uptown sophistication that had first attracted him. “I’ve had several craws full of Village deli food and ethnic African wildebeest. One hopes your clothes and car are signs of better taste than that.”

Solo’s eyes took in her gown, jewelry and fur, and crinkled in quiet amusement. He said nothing, but his expression told Beth Gottsendt, “You’ve let me choose dinner, and I promise you we’ll have the best meal you’ll ever eat on this island.”

Two quick turns of the powerful car, and a surprise bonus presented itself: a parking place-unheard of!-just off MacDougal Alley. His dark eyebrows raised to salute whichever Fate had blessed him, and a moment later he was escorting his lady into the quietest of the many dining areas in The Jumble Shop.

“It’s a remake of an historic old house,” he explained as they were seated at a table already served with two glasses of Dry Sack. “There’s a rumor that no one knows just how many dining alcoves they have here, and Edgar Allan Poe is said to have gotten drunk many a night by betting he could take a different drink in each room, and never repeat.”

But she was not to be so lightly awed. “Yes, this is where they have the original Wanamaker Stable.” She beamed at him and looked about in a proprietary way, sipping her sherry. “I’ve heard the food is superb, especially anything from the charcoal broiler.”

“Uhmmm,” said Solo, covering his squashed pride with sudden interest in a painting of Washington Square. “Yes, the broiler. Something wonderful.” He grinned boyishly all at once, and added, “And the fudge here is terrific.” He toasted her with a click of meeting glasses, and they laughed together.

The evening continued most adequately, amid the low noise-level of a congenial restaurant, with fine Italian wine and the couple’s chatter over dishes heaping with beef and accessories. The Solo brow wrinkled in satisfaction as the courses progressed and this delightfully feminine creature repeatedly delighted him with her beauty and ready conversation.

Coffee and tortoni were just being finished when the maitre d’ came to their table escorting a blond sweatered man with a newspaper folded under one arm.

“Illya!” exclaimed Napoleon, rising to perform introductions while their waiter brought a chair. Napoleon wondered how his partner planned to explain this meeting, but his heart sank a bit over the reasons he suspected.

Illya Kuryakin, blandly not noticing the gentlemen who wore ties to The Jumble Shop, made himself comfortable and seemed to become part of the group at once. His open, fair smile made it hard not to like him; he had the looks and manner of a gentle intellectual.

“Mr. Waverly told me you planned to be here,” he said, refusing Napoleon’s offer to be third on a match. As he lit his own Gauloise Blue he continued, “I mentioned I’d be in the Village tonight, and he asked me to deliver a message; then he reconsidered, and decided he had a number of things to say. He’d like you to call him at your earliest convenience.”

“I plan to see him first thing in the morning,” said Napoleon, suspicions confirmed. Pleading with his eyes to be let off, he continued, “I, uh, don’t think I can call him just now”. Reaching inside his coat, Napoleon tried to indicate to his partner that he had left behind his U.N.C.L.E. communicator, to avoid the embarrassment of beeping in the middle of his date.

“Oh, certainly you can call him,” smiled Illya, speaking with sufficient firmness to make it an order relayed. “There’s a telephone booth just by the entrance to this room. Oh, and here’s the pen you left behind, in case you need to make notes.” Without a sign that he was forcing Solo’s hand, the Russian casually passed over his own two-way U.N.C.L.E. communicator.

Excusing himself, Napoleon found the booth and stepped inside to cover his call. Thumbing the catch on Illya’s communicator, he said quietly, “Open Channel D, please.”

“Yes, Mr. Solo,” replied Waverly’s dry voice. “I see I estimated Mr. Kuryakin’s timing correctly; it was only a moment ago I had your channel put through to my office. Would you be so good as to come here tonight?”

Napoleon was rapidly thinking of excuses he could offer his chief.

“And, Mr. Solo, please contact agents Langley and Ellik. You will have to pass on to them your current projects; what I have for you this evening promises to be a full time project.” Napoleon dismissed the excuses.

“I’m escorting an outsider, sir,” he said simply. Waverly would know that upsetting the normal requirements of a date could strain the effectiveness of his mundane cover.

“That has been taken into consideration, Mr. Solo,” answered Waverly’s quiet voice. “I have matters to discuss with you, but the whole world will not be plunged into chaos while you escort the-ah, outsider-home. Please do not tarry, however, as I would like you to join Mr. Kuryakin and me in less than an hour.” Napoleon winced, and then had an unreasoning twinge of fear that somehow Waverly could see his expression over the communicator. But there it was: nothing for it but to drive full-bore to Goodrich in the Bronx and back again. He signed off and returned to the table, mentally preparing his excuses for Beth.

Wishing Illya had not make the evening a threesome, he was astonished to find the Russian and Beth with their heads close together, bent over the newspaper Illya had brought. They were working the crossword puzzle.

As he sat down, the pair finally noticed his return. “Oh, Napoleon,” said the girl, “I’m glad you’re back. What’s a five-letter word for surrender?”

“U.N.C.L.E.” he said glumly.

While Illya penciled in the solution, and several others it led to, Napoleon signaled for and paid the check.

“I suppose you two have to be getting on, now,” Illya said. “I’ll see you later, Napoleon. It has been a pleasure meeting you, Miss Gottsendt.” He crammed the paper into his pocket and strolled off toward the exit, leaving Beth a bit frustrated as to how the puzzle would come out.

Napoleon took Beth to her home, presenting her with an amusing if rather fanciful excuse for cutting their evening short. She was almost angry and very intrigued as they said their goodnights in the shadows of an entranceway.

Searching for a key, she looked up at him from under dark eyelashes. “Are you certain you can’t come up for just one drink? It’s been ever so long since I’ve entertained a dark, mysterious stranger.” The perfume of her hair seconded the invitation.

Napoleon found himself drifting forward. He briefly considered dropping his U.N.C.L.E. identification into a mail box with a note saying, “I quit!”

But then he sighed. Still looking deeply into her eyes, he said, “I can’t; I have to return to town now.” Teetering on the thin edge of his sense of duty, he leaned down and took a kiss that warmly repeated her invitation.

“A rain check, please,” he said finally, unhappily, and turned abruptly to hurry back to his car.

He made the drive back to midtown Manhattan in less than twenty minutes. Lesser cars were left in his wake as he weaved the Sting-Ray through late night traffic. He thumbed the borrowed communicator alive, and spoke as he drove, with economy and precision. Before the twenty

minutes had passed, substitute U.N.C.L.E. agents had complete details on the smuggling operation Napoleon had been about to close out.

Flipping the keys to a parking attendant, he entered the ancient brownstone housing U.N.C.L.E. headquarters through the Masked Club. Del Floria's, the usual agent's entrance, had long since closed for the night. Napoleon was led to a dark alcove, where he closed one set of curtains and then turned to another. The maitre d' adjusted a fixture on the wall, and Napoleon was rotated, alcove and all, into the stone and steel reception room of U.N.C.L.E.

Two cold seagulls perched atop a plywood space antenna over a large building on the wildest of the several amusement piers just off the deserted Coney Island beach. Below the gulls a peeling sign brassily announced, "the hilarious, ROLLICKING, UNPARALLELED SPACE HOUSE." A Second plywood aerial, painted silver once as was the first, waved in the wind above the Space House's main entrance, where in fairer weather barkers would stand hawking the many attractions of the place.

Inside, all was quiet. The Alien Room was empty except for the papier-mache Bug Eyed Monsters. The Space Maze was deserted, and all its portholes, glass "teleport" bridges and mirrors were smartly polished since the last customers had left; the floor was clean of tobacco and gum, and no handprints marred the see-through obstacles.

Beyond the Space Maze, deep in a part of the funhouse the public never saw, men in black uniforms and berets tiptoed from place to place, standing or sitting silently, smoking with a minimum of conversation when they had no need to move about. In the room deepest into the Space House, far from the seagulls' cries, a fat man slept.

The bed of the fat sleeper was a violet chair without legs, floating motionless in the center of a blue tiled pool. Overhead, a plastene ceiling kept out the winds and knifelike chill of November. Electric heating lamps made the swimming area into a twenty-four hour, year-round summertime, while delicately modulated fans circulated air through the expansive, aquatic bedroom.

Next to the sleeper a pink styrofoam shark and a purple penguin bobbed in unison as he breathed. His head floated just above the water between them, taking color from both in the semi-tropical artificial lighting.

A bell-like chime rang once across the room, carrying softly over the water to waken him. His first deep breath caused small wavelets to break at the pool's edge as he peered about from eyes buried deeply in fat.

"Did you have a nice nap, Sylvester?" he asked the shark. "And you, Pierette?" he said to the penguin. He sat straighter in his floating chair, and the pudgy fingers on his left hand turned a small rudder as his right activated a sea-screw at the rear of the chair. Literally breasting the waves, underwater but for his head and shoulders, he guided himself to the pool stairs.

Step by step, the once balloonlike body rose slowly from the pool. Rolls of fat jiggled and bounced as he mounted the stairs in slow, careful motion. The backwash from his progress sent the shark leaping at the penguin.

He dripped his way across the colorful carpet, revealing that his nude body was completely hairless, eyebrows and scalp hair were totally gone, making his head a grotesquerie of white flesh and whiter scar tracings. Heavy pendants of flesh dropped and creased all about his body. His fat fingers reached out to depress a delicate figurine, which emitted an even more delicate click, and the wall slid open.

Beyond was a nightmare collection of electronics gadgetry. A small man in tight black trousers, sweater and beret entered the radio room from another door. The swimmer picked up a many-hued beach towel and carefully patted every part of himself dry.

He hummed quietly as he blotted the stomach rolling out over his pelvis, and lovingly rubbed each hand absolutely dry. Covering his shocking hairlessness with a psychedelic terrycloth robe, he sat before the warm console and flicked twin amplifiers to life.

He tuned two Collins KW 26T receivers to a South African weather station, deftly adjusting first one, then the other. A seagull let out a squawk

of indignation as his perch slewed suddenly to the south, and the metal core hidden in the plywood antenna reached out to the ether.

The small black-clad man set two Crown tape decks into motion as the other finished delicate adjustments by ear. Both short wave receivers were producing varying tones oddly complementing each other. The tones became richer, fell off, and then became richer still.

Finally the fat man stood up, beaming. He had tuned both sidebands of the AM broadcast to peak reception. The wavering tones rose and fell for a moment, then were simultaneously disrupted by a beep of sound. The small man stopped and rewound the tape recorders while his coworker almost gleefully flipped off the switch and toggle in the power-down procedure.

With the two tapes playing forward at one/one hundredth of their recording speed, the little man set the tone control and kept one spidery hand on the volume knob. A garble of sound came from one speaker, then from the other. Patiently, he started them over again, and again, until he found synchronization. Both spoke simultaneously.

“Short at 63 and seven-eighths.”

The fat man clapped his soft hands together and stared abstractedly at the wall while the tapes were rewound to be erased. “What do you think of ‘An Arctic Oil Source’ Arnold?” he asked.

Arnold looked up. “Artic oil source?” he asked. “Oh, that’s just fine, Mr. Porpoise. That’ll knock ‘em dead tomorrow.” He continued what he’d been doing.

Porpoise waddled from the room, idly dropping the robe of many colors in water he had dripped earlier. He slipped back into the warm swimming pool and re-mounted his violet lounging chair. Once more enthroned, he breathed deeply, relieved to let the water take his weight. After a short rest he triggered a simple mechanism to inflate the chair, and he was raised into the air. His upper body and the chair’s armrests were held up out of the water.

Another use of the chair appeared as he opened one arm support to reveal a waterproof secretaire from which he took slate and soapstone stick. In a gridded pattern on the big slate he pondered combinations of letters.

“This,” he crooned, “and thus, and our oil source.” He filled in the pattern, and finally with a great sigh of satisfaction he replaced the soapstone and submerged his chair.

Before he started snoring anew, one hand pushed away the slate. His eyes closed and he was asleep as the slate bobbed to the pool’s edge. The small man from the radio room retrieved it and carried it quietly from the room. Once again the shark and the penguin subsided from their mock battle into a serio-comic bobbing, seeming to mimic the sleeper’s breathing.

Outside in the night a black motorcycle roared to life. The sound faded into distance as the Yamaha, Arnold, and the slate headed off toward Manhattan.

Chapter 2

“But that isn’t illegal!”

Illya stared at the unfinished puzzle before him, lines of heavy concentration crossing his Slavic brow. One small portion of the puzzle eluded him still.

“Perhaps if you took another look at fifteen down, Mr. Kuryakin. As a law enforcement officer, surely you can come up with something better than ‘know’ for ‘apprehend’.” Waverly dropped his glance back to the paper before him and continued to sort out some of the many pieces of information that daily crossed his desk.

Illya looked up, startled. “How could you see the definition from there, sir?” he asked, as he changed ‘know’ to ‘take’ and rapidly filled in the rest of the elusive comer.

“I didn’t see it from here, Mr. Kuryakin. I worked that puzzle myself just this morning. Our press study department releases the paper to me just prior to lunch, after sifting it for possibly sensitive information, and I use the puzzle to fill in odd moments.”

Illya crossed the room to look at his chief’s solution to the puzzle just as Reception notified them that Napoleon was in the building. Waverly handed Illya the open paper with a curious smile and put through a signal to London to start the recorded questioning of Alain.

Napoleon entered the room, glanced from his chief to Illya, and took a seat at the huge round table. Waverly looked up from his communication console and smiled with only his eyes. “Ah, Mr. Solo,” he said in token welcome. “You are just in time to join us in monitoring a recorded interrogation of a Thrush messenger.”

Solo knew from the smile and the voice that Waverly was running short on sleep, from which he deduced that this was no simple interrogation. Seated opposite Illya, he watched part of one wall dissolve into a realistic color picture showing two men moving like Keystone Cops in quick-step in a small room. A third man sat limply in a chair.

It was the seated man who caught Solo's attention. He took in the man's hollow, dark eyes and striking face. Except for the slack expression, that face could have been a poet's, a painter's, or a king's.

In one corner of the televideo screen an inset showed a luminous clock face with rapidly moving hands. The time read off was 12:31 with the letters "AM GMT" beneath. Checking his own watch, Napoleon had the eerie feeling he was seeing into the future. The radium dial at his wrist showed over half an hour before midnight. Then he relaxed, subtracting the five hours time difference from Greenwich Mean Time. He realized that he was seeing the early end of an interrogation that must still be going on.

The interrogation proceeded along lines typical of U.N.C.L.E. operations anywhere in the world. The two white-clad agents administered drugs in small doses, the amounts and compositions registering briefly, typewritten across the bottom of the picture. They always reminded Napoleon of titles in a foreign movie. Neither operative addressed the other, since both knew their job of old. The senior of the pair put frequent questions to Alain, who mumbled slowly in reply, losing his inner war with the drugs.

The figures moved rapidly between their instrument table and the chair. They adjusted the lights and microphones. Their voices came across like chipmunk squeaks on the audio as they continued the questioning. For several minutes the Thrush kept up his defense, while the sweep second hand of the inset clock spun in double time. Waverly spoke as one drug finally cracked the barrier. "Would you restart the sequence in real time, please?" he asked the unseen projectionist. The figures in white continued their scurry.

Thirty-nine seconds later the film halted and skipped backward as an affirmative to the order. Napoleon felt a shiver slide along his spine, and

grinned. By now he should be cosmopolitan enough not to be surprised that the projectionist was sending from a booth in London, relaying the broadcast to New York via a communications satellite.

Alexander Waverly spoke. “You will notice,” he said, in precise syllables, “that there seems to be no last-ditch attempt at either suicide or escape. We surmise that this man, Alain, is a moderately low level Thrush, commissioned with very little real information.” Solo turned to look at his chief questioningly.

“Yes, Mr. Solo, I quite anticipate your question. If he is unimportant, you are wondering, why are we concentrating so seriously on him and ruining your evening?” With a gesture to the screen, Mr. Waverly indicated that the question would answer itself.

The chipmunk squeaks became human speech and the clock ran at a normal pace in the London drama. One of the men in white hammered out a question.

“I don’t know about the States,” answered the prisoner in a blurred monotone, rocking his head from side to side as if under physical torture. The question was rephrased and repeated in a softer tone.

“I don’t know about the States,” the prisoner again assured his questioners. “I only know the numbers, just before some shows. All I do is slip them in, and make sure they know Thrush said so.”

More questions, digging deeper as resistance slipped to nil, revealed he was an actor from the London West End, using only his single name, Alain, professionally. He had been running errands for Thrush for years, attempting all the while to become a recognized artiste in the theater on his own. Throughout the questioning, he kept repeating the phrase his interviewers never sought: “I don’t know about the States.”

“We don’t know about the States, either, Mr. Solo,” interjected Waverly with some dryness, after asking the London projectionist to skip the interrogation forward to the next breakdown of Alain.

The men in white began to skip around again. Their voices rose in pitch. Alain, slumped deeply into the chair supporting him, seemed the only normal part of the scene. After some minutes, the two agents again slowed to normal speed. Napoleon noted that the interrogation had lasted for nearly three hours.

Alain, under a deep hypnotic sleep, was repeating back a long sequence of numbers to his questioners. The numbers all referred to money, possibly the price of some commodity. Alain didn't know what it was he was passing along, or to whom, for certain. He admitted that on the nights he had numbers to pass on, the audience of the play he had written and was producing swelled enormously.

The questioners brought him back to consciousness. Napoleon watched them bait the poor actor with the bits and pieces of information they had gleaned from his unconscious mind. Alain sat, dumbly ignoring them, until one insulted his abilities as an improviser. He had a professional's pride in his ad libs, and caught fire when the other remarked that the whole job was badly bungled.

"Bungled!" he bellowed around his drug-thickened tongue. His head snapped back, and his huge eyes chilled Napoleon even across three thousand miles. "One filthy spy, accidently suspecting my code, is not a bungle. With the same task, sir, you would stammer like a schoolboy caught stealing biscuits. I am Alain, and to everyone else the art of interpolation is thickest mystery."

All of his strength was spent in that outburst; he fell back and lapsed into a burbling, uneasy doze. The two men in white tried to rouse him again, but the questioning had come to an end. The projectionist speeded the film once again, and abruptly Waverly closed a switch which turned the wall into dead plaster.

Lights came up to full and Alexander Waverly reached for one of the several pipes lying on his desk. "That, gentlemen, is the lot. This actor, Alain, was taken about five hours ago by one of our agents who quite literally stumbled across him." His fingers idly tamped the pipe as he continued. "Alain was passing along one of his 'numbers' to a theater

audience this evening and our man …" Waverly put down the pipe to reach for one of the many reports on his desk. " … Ah, yes, our man Kimberly-Phelps happened to be present. He was apparently curious enough about Alain's ad lib to speak to him about it, whereupon this loyal subject of the Crown pulled a gun and pumped two rounds into what he supposed was a coppers' nark."

Illya darted a glance at Napoleon, who asked sotto voce, "What sort of a snark?"

Ignoring the non sequitur, Waverly consulted the report and continued, "Our agent was shot twice in the lower abdomen, but was, luckily, able to answer with a mercy bullet. The show's leading lady, attracted by the shots no doubt, ran in from an adjoining dressing room to find both Kimberly-Phelps and the actor unconscious. Our man had tried to communicate with London Headquarters and the girl figured out how to answer them on his communicator. Her quick thinking is the only thing that saved his life."

"A fine thing," said Napoleon, "when our white knights have to be rescued by fair maidens."

"Ironically enough, our, ah, white knight seems to have been there only through his interest in the fair maiden. Alain was not suspect, and if he had not gone off the deep end it is doubtful we would have ever discovered this particular Thrush plot." He emptied the unlit pipe and proceeded to fill it with fresh tobacco.

"Gentlemen, it is apparent from this fellow's answers that some part of the plot includes Thrush activities in this country. We must take immediate appraisal of that fact." Reaching for another file, he continued. "Alain has revealed that he was distributing information to a large group of Thrush investors. Our research department in London has concluded that the investments are in gold."

Both Enforcement agents sat up with refreshed interest. "Gold," said Illya reflectively. "Gold stocks have fluctuated unusually for several months now," he recited, remembering the current-affairs briefings they audited whenever stationed at headquarters.

Solo looked from one to the other in question. “But anyone can give tips on the market, even in code. We seem to have this clown cold on a charge of assault with a deadly weapon, and were throwing in a charge of being a gold-stock tout. But that isn’t illegal.”

“Mr. Solo,” replied his implacable section chief, “the emphasis here is placed on the constant reference to the States. Alain’s relay of information may be part of an international conspiracy to manipulate securities in two countries. That is illegal. Many stocks are traded in both London and New York. Thrush could easily work havoc with any one of them, by forcing the price up or down in London, and using the five hour time difference to buy or sell to their advantage here.”

Reference to another file gave Napoleon and Illya time to light fresh cigarettes before the gray-haired U.N.C.L.E. executive continued. “As Alain has given us no leads to his-hmm-clients, we can only work backwards from fluctuations in the price of gold stocks.” He spun the table top, placing the file directly before Napoleon.

“These are the results of our computer’s analysis of the recent price fluctuations.” Waverly waited for Napoleon to open the file.

“You will note the strong correlation between the numbers we dredged up out of Alain and the price of Breelen’s common. It is almost certain that Breelen’s is the victim in this little play. The S.E.C. has agreed to allow trading in Breelen’s to continue unchecked for two more days. You will have to find the Thrush organization in that time and take whatever steps you find necessary to defeat them in this venture.”

Waverly sat back. Looking directly at his two top agents, he idly filled a second pipe with tobacco. “Tomorrow, Mr. Solo, you will make the rounds of the New York brokerage offices. You will openly question them about gold trading with emphasis on Breelen’s stocks.”

Solo groaned, and looked at his chief in dismay, wondering if he had understood the assignment clearly. But Waverly promptly turned his attention to Illya. “Mr. Kuryakin, you will report to Communications, where

you will pick up two of our experimental continuous signal tracers." Illya allowed just the hint of a smile to move his lips, knowing that Solo would writhe under the beat-pounding assignment in hot envy if Waverly gave him an action spot.

As Mr. Solo visits the brokerages, you will act as a parallel guard," continued Waverly. "You will ride with him as passenger and observer." Napoleon leaned back, enjoying this vastly.

"It is optimistic of us, perhaps, but we hope Mr. Solo will encounter Thrush activity in some form during his investigation, and your presence may be required to turn events in our favor." He smiled again with his eyes, and the two agents knew that top-level U.N.C.L.E. deliberations had condemned them to slog through this crisis on the pavements of New York City.

Napoleon led the way as they left Waverly's sanctum in favor of some sleep. As they descended in the express elevator, Illya asked Napoleon, "Have you ever known Mr. Waverly to make a deliberately false statement?"

"Not to friends."

"He told me he had worked this puzzle. But look, it's still blank." Illya shook his head in wonderment.

Solo smiled sympathetically. "You and your little world of crossword puzzles just took a killing blow, Illya. I am of the opinion that Mr. Waverly works your favorite puzzle in his head."

The wiry assistant radio operator stepped timidly into his master's Coney Island hideaway.

"Mr. Porpoise, sir …"

The fat man woke instantly, frowning at the noise. His eyes, buried deeply in fat and scar tissue, burned into the little Thrush. "What is it,

Arnold? Why did you wake me?" Behind his quiet voice, unspoken annoyance lay heavy.

"Thrush Central is calling, sir; Top Priority message. One of the board wishes to speak to you personally."

"Very well, switch it onto my monitor."

Arnold pressed a hidden control in the paneled wall and a section of the room's overhead rotated to become an opaque screen. With a soundless flicker, an image came into being on the huge video monitor, revealing a well-dressed, distinguished-looking old gentleman seated at a polished oaken desk that might have been used for football half-time exercises. This was Mr. Benedict, Thrush Centrals counterpart to U.N.C.L.E/s Alexander Waverly.

"Avery, I have some disturbing news," Mr. Benedict began without preamble when his screen showed the connection had been made. "U.N.C.L.E. has taken out one of your minor operatives, my boy; that actor fellow you were using in your communications link in London. I'm afraid that by now they may have everything he knows about your little project."

Surprise and a smattering of panic crossed Porpoise's face, and he elbowed, his huge bulk into a more attentive position, sputtering and reddening.

"Alain knew nothing of importance," he said. He waved his hands about and looked at the screen apprehensively before he had to sit back in the water from the strain. "Don't worry, sir, it was only necessary to give him simple messages," he wheezed, as his normal sepulchral color returned. "In fact, he insisted on knowing nothing more, so he would run no risks himself."

"I'm happy to hear that, my boy," replied Mr. Benedict, "because that reflects sound Thrush policy. However, aren't you going to be somewhat embarrassed in finishing your financial juggling?"

“The project is nearly completed,” said the fat water-baby, leaning back in his violet floating chair and smiling up at the ceiling. “U.N.C.L.E. can’t stop us now, and even if they could, we still show a considerable profit on the venture. You will recall that one of my premises in requesting so much working capital was that there would at almost all times be a profit available, guaranteed against all hazards.”

“Yes, but one should never underestimate U.N.C.L.E. If they tie this actor to you, you may be forced to abandon that very pleasant retreat by the sea.”

“I’m not underestimating them, sir. You see, we now have approximately 34.7 percent of Breelen’s, and tomorrow we will sell short. My calculations show that Breelen’s own agents will attempt to pick up as much of our shorts as their funds allow, hoping to scuttle our venture. However, with their present capital, they can purchase at most 12.3 to 12.4 percent of the total.” Porpoise’s little red kiwi eyes took fire from the progress of his mind through his accumulated knowledge of finance.

“Well surprise them by delivering that, and then dump the rest in three batches. The market will drop, once, twice, thrice! Calculations show that Breelen’s will try to sell a small block at the first plummet, and buy again at the second. Already they are desperate to retain control of their own shares, and then they’ll have to sell an even larger block at the third stage, which we of course will buy after the London Exchange closes. When they try to buy back, they’ll find no stock for sale, and we will be sitting prettily on more than a controlling interest.”

“I’m pleased the effort is so well along, my boy, but what if U.N.C.L.E. interrupts you before the finale?”

Waves of laughter traveled over the island of avoirdupois floating in the violet chair. “Even if they managed to halt trading on Breelen’s Gold,” he said amid deep chuckles, “and we fail to acquire complete control, we must make between seven and eight hundred percent profit. On the other hand, owning Breelen’s and a handsome profit to boot, we are guaranteed the control of South Africa’s newest nation’s major industry. I am the first to

admit, sir," he said, wiping his eyes with a wet wrist, "that this is not a direct path to world domination, but…"

"But, it will still stand up as a most commendable effort, Avery, and it is a pleasure to have entrusted you with carrying out your idea. Thrush Central is very pleased with your intermediate reports, and the rest of the council will be happy to hear that the loss of one operative means no danger."

"Thank you, sir. I'm very glad to have your approval."

"Oh, indeed, Avery. And now, I've kept you from your rest quite long enough. Good night, my boy, and do keep me advised when anything major breaks there." Mr. Benedicts face splashed across the spectrum as he closed the circuit, and Arnold fingered another control to restore the room's ceiling to norMal.

"Good night, Arnold," breathed Porpoise in contentment. "Send a message to London about Alain, so that his work can be done in some other way for a few days. Even if it's not as efficient, we are nearly through. And try not to disturb me again."

"Yes, sir-er, that is, no, sir," mumbled the small man, backing quietly from the room. Unheard in the insulated pool room, clocks outside struck three.

Chapter 3

“Which blip is me?”

Napoleon Solo entered Del Floria’s looking brisk and efficient, but feeling exactly like a man who has just made do with three and a half hours’ sleep. He returned the tailor’s cheery greeting with a grimace and stepped into a fitting booth. Del Floria depressed the steam mangle twice while Napoleon turned a clothes hook. The booth’s wall gave way to reveal one of U.N.C.L.E.‘s nicer fringe benefits.

“Illya is waiting for you in Communications, Napoleon,” breathed the brunette receptionist. She might have come up to his chin, standing. Napoleon allowed her to pin on his triangle badge, which gave him access to the U.N.C.L.E. complex.

“Illya is waiting for me?” he asked incredulously.

“Yes, Napoleon.” She was amused. “He arrived almost an hour ago. He said you would probably sleep a bit late.” Her smile was as delicious as the rest of her.

Napoleon congratulated himself on working for an outfit that picked its employees for physical fitness as well as intelligence. He followed a tall blonde part way to the high-speed elevator. Two floors up, he passed another tall blonde and a tidy redhead. At Communications he was met by another brunette, who guided him through the maze of U.N.C.L.E. electronics to a small lab. Napoleon was feeling much more alive and awake by the time he finally got to Illya. The brunette left him at the door of the lab.

“Good morning, early bird. Don’t you ever sleep?”

Illya replied with an eloquent silence as he buried himself more deeply in a wiring diagram. Two lab technicians entered, ignored Napoleon

completely, and handed Illya three more sets of drawings. These were quickly spread out on the only open space in the room, the floor. Napoleon found himself being crowded into a comer. No one seemed to care that he was there at all.

“I could be asleep in bed right now,” he said to no one in particular. No one in particular answered. He was getting a bit bored with the whole thing when he noticed the computer console. Colored lights on its face blinked in strange patterns.

Tentatively, he depressed a button. Nothing went “Wheep-wheep,” or “Bwoinng,” so he depressed another. Overhead what appeared to be a large television screen came to life. A crisscross pattern in pale green was the only picture.

The others were still oblivious of his presence. He pushed more buttons, and the screen overhead flicked. The grid pattern changed both in size and color. Napoleon was just beginning to enjoy himself when Illya said, “I see you’re ready for the tests, Napoleon. Where did you learn to operate a 315?”’

“A good agent keeps up on everything, Illya,” Napoleon smiled, “or so you keep telling me.”

Illya held up a tiny glass-enclosed mechanism. “This is your tracer.” He handed over a device slightly larger than a paper match, with a straight pin running parallel to its length.

“A little large, isn’t it?” Napoleon asked. “The pinhead tracer we usually use couldn’t be a tenth this size.”

“The pinhead tracer’s signal is only good for about five miles at best. This can be picked up by the receiver here from virtually anywhere in this hemisphere.”

Napoleon looked at the tracer again with a bit more respect. “What’s more,” Illya continued, “it can send forever. It gets its power by crossing the earth’s magnetic lines. As long as you keep moving, or even breathing,

it will keep on sending." Illya pinned a second tracer to the neck of his sweater. Napoleon followed suit and decorated the underside of his right lapel.

Illya sat down at the computer console. His fingers flew over the buttons faster than Napoleons eyes could follow. The grid pattern on the overhead screen was suddenly overlaid by a passable map of the city, in red.

The two technicians flipped toggles on the receiver, and a tiny blip of pure gold appeared on the map.

"That's us," Illya informed Napoleon as his fingers moved over the buttons again. The map expanded on the screen, flowing off the edges in all directions. The tiny golden blip stayed centered.

Illya stopped the expansion when the map showed several square blocks complete with streets and buildings. "It's programmed for New York and many other areas from aerial photographs. Of course, parts of the world are still all white on the map. Let's hope, though, that we don't have to go to Borneo."

He set the map to expanding. Napoleon watched the city blocks grow off the edges of the screen until only one remained. Across the room, one of a set of large spinning drums made a clucking sound. The bluish-green grid was suddenly overlaid with an orange floor plan. Napoleon recognized the third floor of U.N.C.L.E. headquarters.

"This building and a few others are also in the map logic," Illya informed him. "The receiver can detect altitude as well as direction and distance, and so triggered the third floor's plan. If you went upstairs or down, it would change the plan accordingly."

Again Illya expanded the map, bringing the bright gold blip subjectively closer. The blip split in two. Napoleon found himself looking at a miniature representation of U.N.C.L.E. Communications.

"Which blip is me?" he asked his partner.

“Watch.” Illya rose and walked across the room. One of the yellow blips slid across the screen. Illya returned, the blip returned. Illya left the room, the blip slid all the way off the screen. The second blip, Napoleon’s blip, remained centered, unmoving. The first blip returned, and a moment later Illya re-entered the room.

“We have tuned to you as the primary, and to me as the secondary. The only problem is that both signals trigger the same color on the display. But unless we both get taken it shouldn’t be hard to tell which is which.”

“Unless we both get taken?” Napoleon asked.

“Yes. You are the stalking goat to bait the Thrush tiger, and I am the Great White Hunter.” They solemnly shook hands.

“If I’m the bait, and you’re the hunter, how did we get stuck with legwork for the next two days?”

“If we’re lucky, Thrush will find you long before then.” The two agents left the lab, arguing the merits of the plan.

One of the technicians sat down at the console. He depressed a series of buttons and the display grew slightly. The two golden blips merged into one, entered the high-speed elevator and plummeted through flickering floorplans to the U.N.C.L.E. parking area in the basement of the old brownstone.

“Let’s talk to some of the good guys first,” Napoleon parked the special U.N.C.L.E. wing-door sedan in a no parking zone. Across the street was one of the oldest and most reputable brokerage houses in New York City. “I don’t know how the bad guys are going to react, so first I find out how the good guys are going to react. Right?”

Illya looked up from the crossword puzzle on his lap. “What’s a four-letter word for stool pigeon?”

“What?”

“Stool pigeon. I need a four-letter word for…”

“No, I heard you. Illya, a stool pigeon is a coppers’ nark.“Napoleon stepped from the car into the traffic.

“What kind of a snark?” was lost behind as he picked a path across the street.

The next twenty minutes established the pattern for the rest of Napoleons day. He entered the brokerage office and was received by a severe looking young woman seated behind a glass enclosure. “Whom did you wish to see, sir?” she asked with a minimum of lip motion.

Napoleon scanned the company’s letterhead. “Mr. MacInnes, please,” he said, choosing at random from the list. A bit of business with whispering into an intercom followed. The girl looked up momentarily.

“Who might I say is calling, sir?”

“Napoleon Solo,” he answered. There followed more whispering.

“And what, precisely, might I say is your business?” She looked at him very sternly.

“You might say that it’s private,” he answered with a boyish smile.

The receptionist put the instrument down and asked Napoleon to wait. He waited.

Finally an even severer looking older woman appeared and told him his name. Without further preamble she led him through a series of glass-enclosed passages. They passed a dozen cubicles, each cubicle containing an identical looking chair, an identical looking desk, an identical looking young man and three ringing telephones. The noise level was unbelievably low considering the activity.

“Mr. Solo, please go right in” His guide opened a door of polished walnut, and Napoleon entered an office twice the size of Waverly’s. In one glance he took in a deep-pile white rug, the walnut paneled walls, fireplace,

and built-in bar. On the far side of the room a large slab of walnut was masquerading as a desk. Behind it a tiny wisp of a man looked up in unfeigned annoyance.

“What is your business, sir?” The question was a staccato of words.

“I am with the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement,” Napoleon answered. “My credentials.” He handed the little man a gold embossed U.N.C.L.E. identification card.

The little man read every word on the card with great care. He peered up at Napoleon, who Wed to look as much like the picture as possible. “Very pretty.” The card was dismissed. “Now tell me, what is your business?”

“I want to ask you some questions about gold stocks,” Napoleon began.

“We have a number of young men here, Mr. Solo. All of them capable brokers. Choose any one of them. He will be able to handle your business.” MacInnes was closing the interview.

“Mr. MacInnes,” Napoleon began again, more firmly. “I want to ask you some questions about gold stocks. In particular I want to know the names of the people who have been buying and selling Breelen’s common in the past few months.”

MacInnes froze for seconds, then let a smile break across his wintry face. “You don’t let yourself be pushed around much, do you?” he asked in a much more relaxed tone. “You want a list of our clients dealing in Breelen’s common? Don’t you realize that there are certain professional ethics involved? What does U.N.C.L.E. want with the information anyhow?”

Napoleon was unsure which question he should field first. Before he could make the decision, MacInnes was talking into an intercom.

“Mrs. Stark, get me the billing records on Breelen’s common, for the last six months.” He smiled at Napoleon again, and asked, “Is there any

other stock you're interested in?"

"Ah … no, no thank you. Just Breelen's."

MacInnes started chatting to fill the time. His conversation was a series of questions. Napoleon gave up trying to follow them, much less answer. Minutes later, the huge door swung open, and two young men entered, carrying a portable file between them.

"That is it, Mr. Solo. The list you asked for." With satisfaction, MacInnes watched Napoleon's eyes begin to glaze over. "Breelen's common has been one of the most active stocks on the Exchange in the past few months. There have been thousands of short term speculations. We have made a tidy sum in brokerage fees. One of our most popular stocks."

Napoleon brought out his U.N.C.L.E. communicator. "Illya, are you there?"

"Yes, Napoleon, what is it?"

"Get a team up here for some data collection. Have them ask for Mr. MacInnes. In fact, you'd better have Mr. Waverly get a couple of teams on this. There's probably quite a bit more coming at our next stop."

"Right! By the way, what's a four-letter word for South African money?"

MacInnes looked up. "Rand, Mr. Solo. Tell him R-A-N-D."

"R-A-N-D." Napoleon repeated obediently. "What's a rand?"

"You're investigating Breelen's and you don't even know what a rand is? Weren't you informed that Breelen's is worth hundreds of millions of rands? Weren't you told that the stock is actually backed by the rand?" The series of questions continued.

Napoleon excused himself, and left MacInnes still barking questions.

“Hundreds of millions of rands?” he asked. Mrs. Stark gave him her severest look. A vision of an African in a loin cloth, pushing a wheel barrow full of colorful paper money through the automatic doors of a modem supermarket, flitted irreverently through his mind.

“Mrs. Stark, how much is a rand? How many hundred to the dollar?”

The secretary paused. “Rands are about two to the pound sterling, sir. That’s about a dollar forty.”

Napoleon’s eyes glazed over again. It took two close misses in crossing the street to jar him back to reality. He consulted the list of seventeen brokers suggested by U.N.C.L.E. Research. At somewhere between half an hour minimum and an hour maximum per visit they would easily fill the two days. Picking the furthest away from U.N.C.L.E. headquarters to start, he put the car into motion and turned into the one way traffic on the avenue.

“Who was Peer Gynt’s mother?

“Mrs. Gynt, of course,” Napoleon answered, without hesitation. “Why don’t you take up chess problems, or knitting?” Illya retreated into silence.

The second through fifth brokerages, much smaller than MacInnes’, gave Napoleon nothing more in the way of leads. The sand under his eyelids felt as though it planned to take up permanent residence. Lunch gave him a chance to rest his aching feet, then it was back to bearding brokers.

By the ninth stop Napoleon was well on the way to hating the world of high finance. To make things worse, Illya had run into a snag in the crossword puzzle.

“Look, why don’t you just call headquarters? It’s almost five; surely Mr. Waverly solved the puzzle hours ago. He can fill in all your blanks and I can have some peace.”

Illya’s return look was filled with soul-pain. Obviously Napoleon didn’t understand crossword puzzles. “You’re the type who would cheat at

solitaire.”

“At least I finish the game.” He backed the sedan into an open alley. “One more and we call it a day.”

Napoleon, limping slightly, dodged hot dog venders and taxis as he crossed to Gambol and Associates. He was received by a young blonde who escorted him in to see Mr. Gambol without ado.

“Yes, sir.” Gambol was the youngest and most earnest looking broker Napoleon had yet met. “How can I be of service, Mr. er, ah …?”

“Solo—Napoleon Solo.” Napoleon went into the little spiel he was perfecting. “I’m with the U.N.C.L.E., and I am investigating the possibility of a large scale stock manipulation.” The little speech continued by itself as Napoleon glanced around the dingy room. Gambol and Associates wasn’t doing too well.

“But, Mr. Solo, surely you must understand that the trust my clients place in me cannot be, er, ah.” The sentence petered out, but Napoleon felt he knew what Gambol meant. He had met variations on this same theme since leaving MacInnes.

“U.N.C.L.E. isn’t asking you to betray a trust. We have good reason to believe that most of the buyers of Breelen’s common stock are working in a conspiracy. You owe it to the rest of your customers to help us.”

“I’m afraid I can’t just take your word for it. I’ll have to call your office to check your bona fides.” Gambol picked up the telephone at his elbow and clicked the receiver rest several times. “Miss Burke, get me the U.N.C.L.E., please.” He smiled apologetically to Napoleon. “I’m sorry, Mr. Solo, but I really must check. You might be who you say, but you might just as easily be a spy of some sort.”

Wondering just what Gambol thought a spy would be doing in his office, Napoleon smiled reassuringly.

“Oh, hello. This is Jason Gambol of Gambol and Associates.” Gambol was more brisk now. After a pause he continued. “Yes, that’s right, the broker.”

“I have a gentleman here by the name of Solo, Napoleon Solo. He claims to be an agent of the U.N.C.L.E. He has asked me questions about gold stocks and my clients.” He paused again.

“I just wanted to check. How much can I tell him?” Gambol smiled earnestly at Napoleon.

“Thank you, I shall. Yes, goodbye.”

He turned back to Napoleon. “Well, Mr. Solo, I had no idea you were as important as all that. Ask me anything, anything at all.” Gambol was fairly bursting with enthusiasm.

Napoleon wondered what the girl in U.N.C.L.E. Reception had told Gambol, as he repeated his spiel. Gambol shouted for his Miss Burke. “The billing files on Breelen’s, Miss Burke.” The blonde scampered from the room, followed by Gambol himself, shouting further instructions.

Napoleon sat back, wearily. His eyes burned, his head hurt, his feet hurt, and he needed about twelve hours’ sleep. The communicator in his pocket beeped.

“Go ahead, Illya,” he said quietly.

“What’s a petty annoyance in fifteen letters?”

“Crossword puzzle! The answer is crossword puzzle.” He slapped the communicator silent and closed his eyes again.

“Sit quite still, Mr. Solo.” The voice was Gambol’s, but the inflection was deadly. Napoleon opened his eyes and counted three pistols pointed his way. Gambol wasn’t alone.

Wishing he hadn’t cut the Great White Hunter off quite so quickly, Napoleon smiled up at Gambol. “Do you treat all of your clients this way?

Or is this a special, today only?" One of Gambol's burly assistants stepped forward. The pistol in his hand slammed down. Napoleon managed to roll with the blow. Faking unconsciousness, he slumped forward. The second blow knocked him into darkness. He didn't even feel the third.

"One of you get his communicator and gun, and help me get him into the car. Porpoise wants to ask him a few questions." Gambol tied Napoleon's wrists with some shipping twine. Another of his assistants picked Solo up and carried him like a sleeping baby.

"You two check out front—Solo doesn't travel alone. Kuryakin is probably out there waiting for him. Get him-dead will do; Porpoise doesn't need to question them both."

Napoleon's inert form was bundled into a service elevator. He was half dragged into the alley behind Gambol's and dumped into the rear of the car. Gambol tossed a trench coat over the body and prepared to drive away.

"Help Karl and Frank with Kuryakin, then the three of you report in to Arnold." He put the car into drive and headed toward the Battery Tunnel and Coney Island.

Illya looked up from the puzzle in time to see the two heavies come out of the brokerage towards the alley. He rolled into the driver's seat, thumbing his communicator alive.

"Open Channel D, please. This is Kuryakin, and nothing pleasant is coming across the street."

The two thugs ran at him, and one swung the hot dog stand around, blocking the exit. Illya gunned the engine and slammed into reverse. The car screamed as Illya, foot to the floor, backed down the one-way alley. He sent a row of trash cans careening and slewed dangerously close to a solid brick wall. Three stars blossomed on the windshield as shots echoed down the alley.

Still backing, Illya spun the wheel and backed into the cross traffic in the next street. Cars screeched to a halt and climbed the sidewalks to get out

of his way. The communicator at his side spoke.

“Channel D is open. Come in, please.”

Illya swung the car into the curb facing into the oncoming cars. Traffic doubtfully started to pass him. The two Thrushes running blindly, erupted from the-alley mouth. Illya put the car into low and floored it again, scattering the thugs before him.

He snapped the wheel over, skipped the curb and roared down the sidewalk. Spotting an opening, he cut across the oncoming lanes, bouncing high off the curb, and joined the traffic flow in his own direction.

“Channel D is open; come in, please!”

“Kuryakin reporting. I’ve just had a brush with Thrush. I suspect that Napoleon has been taken. Hopefully the tracer is still active. What now?”

“Mr. Kuryakin,” the dry voice of his section chief answered. “Communications reports that the two tracers are separating rapidly. There is no doubt that Thrush has Mr. Solo. But just on the off chance that he and his tracer have been separated I suggest that you visit Mr. Gambol and his Associates yourself. After that, if you haven’t found Mr. Solo, you can follow up the tracer.”

Illya turned off the communicator and settled down to drive. What with one-way streets, stalled vegetable trucks, and pedestrians who never noticed automobiles, he’d be lucky to get back to Gambols before Napoleon died of old age.

Chapter 4

“Somebody up there likes spies.”

Napoleon woke in darkness. I’ve got a thirst that’s intense, he thought, and the general sense that I haven t been sleeping in clover. Engine noise and the smell of rubber and burning oil told him he was in a car. A sudden acceleration rocked him back. He tried to raise up from the floor, but the trenchcoat, bunched at his shoulder, held him down.

The vagaries of traffic and Gambol’s nervous driving bounced him against the driver’s seat and back onto the driveshaft. His hands, bound behind him, were numb, and his shoulders ached. He finally managed to wrench himself around, throwing the stifling coat from his face.

Lights from outside flashed across him. His head hurt, and he still could have used a full night’s sleep. The motion of the car forced him back down, and raised a tide of nausea in his middle.

I wonder how the Great White Hunter is doing, now that Big Tyge has caught the stalking goat. He worked his legs free of the coat, leaving it over them, and kept his eyes shut .while he forced air deep into his lungs. Slowly his head cleared and the world stopped tasting bad; he began to feel a bit more human.

The car slowed to a stop, the wheels sounding as if they were eating into sand. Napoleon opened his eyes, noting that the most serious discomfort he felt was the itching of dried blood on his cheek. The front door of the car slammed and the back door at his feet yawned open. Gambol stooped to pull his prisoner from the car, and Napoleon went into action.

He twisted, whipping his knees up to his chest and then straight out again, springing from his shoulderblades up into where he knew Gambol would be. One foot caught the little Thrush in the glasses, the other in his

sternum, and he sprawled back on the beach. Lungs empty of air and face bloodied, he sat down hard and then collapsed completely.

Napoleon let the kick flow into a gymnast's roll that flung him out of the car and across the moaning broker. He came up awkwardly, spitting sand and trying to balance himself with both hands behind him. Three men in Thrush uniforms were racing up the beach from an amusement pier, the lights from the car silhouetting him neatly for them.

He darted into the shadows under the boardwalk, and took a cement stairwell in a bound. His feet drummed loudly on asphalt as he tried desperately for speed, but the three Thrushes gained. Gasping and weaving, he looked for any haven.

An arcade, closed and bolted, offered a jumble of aisles and shadows. Well into darkness he stopped, pulled up tight. Pursuit came charging, but he forced himself to breathe slowly, silently, knowing he couldn't keep running without air. Oxygen starvation played mod light patterns on his eyes, but he swallowed every urge to gasp.

One Thrush thundered past the arcade, the other two came on more Slowly. Since his footsteps no longer echoed down the deserted boardwalk, they knew he had to be hidden, and it was only a matter of time before they flushed him. His breathing became even and his vision cleared, making him ready for the next effort. A possibility of escape still existed.

He edged cagily out of the aisle, and spotted a big thug who had gone on ahead. Keeping hidden as much as possible, he waited until the other two could be pegged, and he patiently selected the instant when none of the three was looking directly at him. He darted across the boardwalk and rolled over the railing, taking it on his belly and hoping the landing would be at least a little bit easy. The drop knocked the wind out of him, but he managed to scramble back under the pilings before his hunters raced to the edge.

The pilings were crossed and recrossed with a random collection of planks and boards, nailed up in an idiot's design. He wedged himself between them, trying to get as far under their cover as possible.

“He’s down on the beach again. Go on down. We’ll cut back. He can’t get far past us if we’re careful.” They were almost over his head when they separated, their footfalls echoing loudly. The big man sounded twice as heavy as the other two together.

Napoleon worked back past the pilings. He gasped what little air he could get into his lungs, fighting down a reaction to the fetid smell of oil and old fish. Slime and splinters from the posts and boards worked their way through his clothing and into his skin. The itching on his face became unbearable, only because he couldn’t scratch with his hands tied.

The sounds of the Thrushes on the beach floated dimly into his hiding place. He scrunched down and crawled deeper into the maze of crossbars, and suddenly the way opened. There ,, was a runway of sorts, and he rose, proceeding as quietly as possible to put some distance between himself and the Thrushes.

I’ve got a fair idea where they were taking me, he thought. That amusement pier looks like a cover for some sort of Thrush operation. If I can only get in touch with

Illya, we might be able to snatch the whole covey. Then he remembered the tracer pinned under his lapel. The weights of gun and communicator were gone, but if he was still a gold blip on that computer display, Illya would be following him closely. There was no way to tell without freeing his hands.

The blackness of night underneath the boardwalk kept him from seeing the turn until too late. He clipped his head and shoulder on a piling, spun, and ended flat on his back. The giant he*d nicknamed Big Stoop yelled from ahead, “Hey! Under the walk! I heard something-bring the light down here!”

Napoleon was beginning to believe that this wasn’t to be his night. He rolled into a sitting position, hunched forward, and managed to get to his knees. It was then he found the wine bottle.

Somebody up there likes spies, he decided, getting to his feet. Bracing himself, he stomped down on the bottle, breaking it with none of the classic glass-breaking sounds. A dull pop, and his foot made a hundred fine fragments of it, leaving the neck and a portion of the side. He kicked the large glass dagger away from the rest quickly, and knelt with his back toward it.

He finally had to stretch out full length and roll his hands over on the shard. He forced numb fingers to grip and pick it up by the neck. Repeating his earlier twist, he regained his feet, and started on down the runway away from the voices.

Two Thrushes with a flashlight were working their way under the boardwalk. Napoleon heard them stumbling and cursing-even with a light, the way wasn't easy. Plodding as fast as he could, he forced the glass splinter between his wrists, concentrating on the cord and hoping no major veins would get opened in the process.

Gingerly, he flexed his hands and fingers until sweat started running down his face from fear that he couldn't get through the bonds before they caught up with him. When the twine gave and he could feel warmth flowing back into his hands, he almost fell headlong against a post.

His first thought was for the tracer, which was still pinned under his lapel. Its presence, and the needles of pain from his reviving fingers, wrought a subtle change on him. His ears pricked at sounds behind; his eyes peered more deeply into the dark. When he moved, he didn't feel as though both feet were encased in lead. His step was more stealthy, his movements controlled. The hunted had become the hunter.

"Two behind, and only one ahead. I can take him by surprise, and probably double back on the other two with his weapon, and take them from behind. Illya should get here by then, and without these lads to give the alarm we could wind this whole thing up." He flitted silently away from the stumbling Thrushes.

Renewed strength and initiative naturally led to ideas. Napoleon chinned himself on a crosspiece and swung up into rafters, finding the

passage much clearer up near the floor of the boardwalk. He stepped from rafter to crosspiece, rapidly working towards the single Thrush, staying near the outer edge of his catwalk, until a rotten plank cracked under him. He twisted like a lizard and caught a piling with arms and legs while the loosened board gave way and fell, clattering as it struck posts and beams.

A light broke into his hideaway, pinpointing the falling board. A quiet spitting noise followed, and Napoleon knew Thrush was taking their game of hide-and-seek seriously. Another bullet followed the first into the shadows below him, and Napoleon shinnied up his piling away from the action.

“Apis, put that thing away!” screamed the little radio operator, Arnold. “Mr. Porpoise wants Solo alive. You shoot him, and I’ll shoot you.”

“Sorry, Arnold,” answered a bull-like bellow from much too close. “I won’t do it again, honest.”

So his target was spotted, and Napoleon had the good news that they didn’t intend to shoot him down. He swung himself back over the outside of the walk, up over the railing in an acrobatic pullover. The big Thrush was standing on the beach, not two dozen feet away, his whole attention on the fallen board where he was sure Napoleon was still hiding.

“Come to papa,” Napoleon murmured to himself, willing Big Stoop in closer. Standing out on the sand, there was no way to get at him; if he’d just move in, intent on attacking that rotten board-and then the Thrush threw his head back and roared.

“He’s on the boardwalk again. Hey, Arnold, he’s back up there on the boardwalk!”

“So much for plan A,” Napoleon thought, rolling back out of sight. “Now to execute plan B: run!” He sprinted down the deserted beachfront. Behind, he heard the tromp of an elephant; his big friend was topside again, too, and the other two were probably right behind him.

He wiped sweat from his face on one sleeve and then the other. His breath was coming in burning gasps again, and the thundering steps were getting closer.

Napoleon burst into extra speed, spying a street and buildings ahead. He rounded the comer and ran full tilt across the opening, halting in the blackness of an alcove. Not yet in sight, the giant roared, “He’s stopped again!”

The trio charged into the street. Arnold quickly spread all three into a pattern Napoleon couldn’t pierce, and started them slowly walking toward him, searching every cranny. Arnold drew his own silenced pistol. “Mr. Porpoise wants him alive, but if we can’t stop him any other way, shoot! Try not to make it fatal.” Napoleon silently seconded the motion.

Waiting until they were almost on top of him, he spun the remains of his bottle far down toward the boardwalk. It hit the railing and bounced, breaking as it hit below. The reaction to the sound was all he could have hoped for: the three Thrushes took off in hot pursuit, leaving him free to take an alternate path … but with the street so well lighted and all doors shuttered, the problem seemed to be in finding any alternate at all. Coney Island in winter seemed to get rather suburban and respectable; he wished he knew how far away and in what direction he could find the coffee houses and bars that would still be operating for local patrons.

He turned and debated running through the mass of girders and beams making a deep, twisted lattice behind his hiding place. Then he looked up, and his face loosened into a huge grin as he realized where he was. He was face to face with the framework supporting the Cyclone Racer, and was about to take his first free trip on a roller coaster.

He leaped for the lowest crosspiece, and had to make do with embracing an I-beam instead. The chase had used up some of his strength, but he had plenty to shinny up the beam until he could reach the bar, almost twice his own height above the ground. His fingers grabbed, he chinned himself, and threw one leg up over it. Skeletal shadows crisscrossed and merged in the framework above, but he reached up and leaped, caught the next bar, and swung himself up again.

The climbing fell into a pattern of leap, grab, lift and swing, rapidly carrying him skyward. Above, the girders held shining rails out over the boardwalk and back into the amusement park inland. By working his way across the roller coaster, Napoleon would flank his pursuers, giving himself a second chance to pick them off singly. His wrists and arms started complaining under the strain of carrying him up level after level, and he had just enough wind for the exercise. But there wasn't much call for yodeling demonstrations on Coney anyway, not with three gunmen out after him.

He mounted to the rails, and discovered he could move freely by stepping from tie to tie. He paused momentarily to scout the opposition, feeling something like a sparrow on top of The Happy Prince as he looked out and down at the beach. Two Thrushes were stalking an imaginary quarry in the sand, while the third stood guard over the boardwalk, in front of the customer's entrance to the Cyclone Racer.

"The long way around may be the short way home," he decided, and started climbing up from his low-point towards the long incline of the first drop. He got away from the steel slot when he crossed the bottom-spot of the loop, and looked up at the big drop. From its lowest point, the slope seemed impossibly steep and incredibly high. I could have been wrong about this being the short way, he thought. One look at the shadowed crossbeams he would be using for footholds if he climbed straight across convinced him he wasn't wrong: the shorter route around the coaster s course looked twice as risky.

It was more like climbing a ladder than anything else, a ladder built for men twelve feet tall. His legs began to shake with weariness before he was halfway to the top. He made frequent stops, wondering why anyone would want to get on a roller coaster for free and then go in the wrong direction; but, once past the first big drop, if the hunters hadn't changed position the rest would be easy.

Stones rattling below alerted him. He stared down across a three-story drop to see Arnold, climbing like a mountain cougar from level to level, closing the distance between them. The big Thrush was busy watching, his pistol at ready like a deadly toy far below. Then a strange mechanical sound

rang out, and Napoleon froze. His hackles rose as he recognized the roller coaster starting up.

He climbed faster, racing Arnold and the car to the top of the first drop. Twelve feet to go, and he saw it edging up; the maintenance car, normally used to check out the condition of the track, was about to squash him flat. He turned, crouching, and spotted Arnold ducking down over the side of the tracks below him. Between the car and his little friend hanging in wait, Napoleon had less choice than he would playing thimble-rig.

He stood up, facing back down the steep incline. Spreading out his legs to put one foot on each track, he leaned forward and let go. Instantly he was sliding down the tracks. His clothes whipped back in the wind of his passage, and the car behind screeched as the Thrush inside applied brakes. They really did intend taking him alive, but it didn't look now as if they could. Every bit of brake he could apply with the burning heels and soles of his shoes only served to slow him down minutely as he rode two bannisters at once to the bottom of his slide for life.

"Here he comes I" shouted the big fellow on the ground, running to meet him. Arnold, swinging to the ground, shouted instructions. Napoleon reached the bottom of his ski slope inches in front of the car, leaped off into space, and aimed directly at Big Stoop.

The Thrush kept coming, attempting to field him, and for the first time in his life was sent flying. Napoleon rolled, years of combat training taking command. Dazed and winded, he sprawled beyond his big cushion, and rolled into a karate stance, shaking his head. He drew a deep breath, trying to keep his balance and be ready for the two who hadn't set themselves up as bowling pins.

Arnold had gotten caught behind a fence as he came down, but the third man, having stopped the car and leaped to the cement near Napoleon, grabbed at him. Reflex, duck, seize a wrist, crossover, bend and throw. The Thrush sailed inelegantly into the girders of the Cyclone Racer, just as Big Stoop stumbled to his feet, looked around, and started coming towards Napoleon. He grimaced at the man's size, and prepared to sidestep and chop.

“Apis!” thundered Arnold from behind. The giant stopped, and Napoleon’s sidestep was knocked completely out of synch. Big Stoop reached out and plucked him into the air, dangling him with one hand. Napoleon brought a forearm up into the exposed neck, followed by a backhand across the eyes.

“I got him, Arnold,” the giant laughed, ignoring Napoleon’s hostilities. Arnold stepped forward, his face stretched into a strange smile. The third Thrush lay very still, moaning.

“Bring him along, Apis, and help del Grado. Mr. Porpoise isn’t going to be happy about having to wait.” The little Thrush faced Napoleon, well out of arm’s reach. “You led us quite a chase, Solo. Pity it was all for nothing, but don’t worry; we only want to ask you a few questions.” The voice through his smile was a thin snarl.

Apis shifted his grip to Napoleon’s shoulder, lowering him to the ground. Without effort, he picked up the fallen Thrush with his other hand, and the four of them started moving back over the field they’d run across. Napoleon reached up and took the tracer from his lapel under cover of wiping sweat from his face.

Gambol had been a dub about frisking him, but that was no reason to think these pros would make the same mistake. As they passed through the gaping entranceway back to the boardwalk, Napoleon pinned the tracer to Apis’s belt. With any luck at all it would still be there when the Great White Hunter arrived with the cavalry.

Section II : “Does Napoleon have a future?”

Chapter 5

“Let’s be reasonable about this.”

“Mr. Napoleon Solo from U.N.C.L.E.,” said the fat man, speaking in a soft, clear voice that carried over the water and emphasized the quiet that normally existed in his aquarium room. “I am Avery D. Porpoise, an executive of Thrush.” The air was stifling. Napoleon estimated the temperature at over eighty, and the humidity must have been nearly enough to make it dryer in the pool. The change from violent exertion in the chill night outside made his voice crack. “You aren’t on Thrush Central-” he said, jerking to a halt as Arnold twisted his right arm sharply behind his back.

“Thank you, Arnold,” said Mr. Porpoise, taking a sip of his drink and settling the glass back down on the water in its yellow styrofoam float. “You must take Arnold seriously, Mr. Solo, because he has just warned you to speak softly. If you insist on stirring up a lot of noise in a room I have designed for my own personal comfort, he will probably do you some personal damage.

“You’re absolutely correct about my position; I assume your briefings at U.N.C.L.E. keep you informed concerning promotions to the Central Committee of Thrush, even as I am kept informed regarding movements among your superiors. But this is only hair-splitting: I am so close to the Committee that you will probably not meet anyone ranking me during your lifetime. Within a few days, I intend to become Thrush’s paymaster-general, in complete charge of the master financial operations.”

Great frosted lamps in the ceiling kept the room like an oven, and beads of sweat rolled down the faces of all the non-swimmers. Porpoise in his pool seemed perfectly at home, resting in the garish floating chair that reminded Napoleon of the device mothers use to teach infants to enjoy the water.

Napoleon spoke softly, finding that his voice carried perfectly in the big room. “I can only put two and two together, Mr. Porpoise. Since your stock broker brought me in after I asked questions about the upheavals in gold prices, you must be earning your promotion on the New York Stock Exchange. Good luck,” he said-adding as an afterthought, “And you’ll need it, because even with Thrush’s resources, it’ll be easier to lose a fortune trading gold than to win one.”

Porpoise nearly swamped himself in a bout of laughter following Napoleon’s friendly warning. His floating drink rocked on the crests of small tidal waves, and water lapped up on the pool deck; red-faced and heaving with laughter, the fat man made almost no sound at all.

“Oh,” he said weakly, drying his eyes with the back of a wet arm, “oh, that is rich. You’ve just earned your own life, Mr. Solo, because you’ve told me what no amount of questioning could have tom from you.”

The U.N.C.L.E. agent looked questioningly from one Thrush to another around the room, and saw that each was keeping one eye on him and the other on their chubby employer. Obviously, his hysterics weren’t sending them all into conniptions of back-slapping and fair cheer. The fat man brought his laughter under control, and turned to where Gambol stood, bandaged, sweating and very nervous.

“When Mr. Solo questioned you, how much did he seem to know of this operation? Did he seem to be after you personally?”

Under the lights Gambol seemed soft and pallid. He shifted from foot to foot, touching his cut and bruised face. “Like I said, he came in like a man from Candid Camera, asking me big as life to tell him who dealt heavily in gold. If he was setting a trap, why did he spread out his U.N.C.L.E. identification, and why’d he get right to the point like that?” The little broker turned all his worries into anger, and blasted at Napoleon in a hoarse whisper, “Why me, anyway? You’ve got your damned nerve, waltzing in on a Thrush satrap organization and expecting me to just tell you exactly who I’m working for! Do you think this is some kind of game?”

“Oh, dear me!” exclaimed Porpoise, pushing his empty glass over to an attendant for a refill. “Certainly U.N.C.L.E. must have had some reason for sending agents out on a mission like that, and its apparent from where I sit that this is a simple beginning investigation, in which they hoped to learn something about our gold manipulations.

“You,” he said to Napoleon, “are a nuisance. But, my dear Gambol, I doubt they even suspected you at all.” He leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes and sipped from his new drink before continuing. “I wish, however, that they had picked a more skilled agent. After all, you did bring him directly here. If he was followed, you may have led U.N.C.L.E. right to my little pleasure palace.”

Somehow it was harder for Gambol to bear the soft voice with Porpoise’s eyes closed than it was with the little red pig eyes boring into him. He sweated more profusely, and stammered in his own defense, “Arnold said to bring him in! Arnold said to get him and bring him here, and I even sent out men to look for other agents before I left. And I had him frisked when he was out, and took his gun and his communicator!”

Porpoise remained aloof during Gambol’s outburst, resting behind his eyelids. When the broker quieted down, the chief Thrush made little noises of disapproval, and reached behind his chair to adjust his position. All but his face submerged, and the quiet voice seemed to come up from the water itself as he pronounced sentence on Gambol.

“Your office was visited by a top U.N.C.L.E. agent, and he was probably not alone. You did quite well to call here and inform us about Mr. Solo, his presence in your office and his interests, but you should never have brought him here yourself. I would far rather you had remained in your office to present a normal face to whatever follow-up

U.N.C.L.E. might have had in mind to Mr. Solo’s call. I’m sure one of your goons could have delivered him here with a bit more efficency than you have shown… .” He stopped, and his bright eyes opened to stare in sudden comprehension at the ceiling. “Gambol,” he said, “what did you say you removed from Solo’s person?”

“His gun and communicator,” stammered the broker. “So he couldn’t-”

“Yes, yes,” said Avery Porpoise, turning his head to where Napoleon stood under guard. “Frisk him thoroughly, Apis.” he said to the giant standing ready. “If he is clever enough to escape when bound, as I’m certain Gambol would not be, he must be clever enough to be carrying some sort of device to lead U.N.C.L.E. to him. Not even they could have been confident of following a car through New York traffic.”

Apis moved around in front of Napoleon, keeping one eye on him while his big hands moved under lapels and inside shoulder-paddings. Napoleon grinned at the Thrush, noting on one level that Arnold, on his right, never let go a very solid lock on his wrist. “I’m really as harmless as a glass of old port after supper,” he said, flinching as Apis’ search tickled him. “With your being twice my size, and your friend ready to break my arm, I don’t feel the least bit inclined to try breaking you over my knee.”

Porpoise’s oily, quiet voice came up from the water. “Apis is only taking ordinary precautions in his search. He knows you are harmless without weapons under the circumstances, with so many of my men standing by, but he finds it impossible to overcome years of training about the need enemy spies feel to escape.”

Napoleon shrugged and tried to ignore the methodical investigation of his clothes. It was hard to keep being nonchalant when Apis began fondling the buttons of his suit jacket. Harder still, when one after another the buttons were ripped off and held up to the light. Apis tsk’ed over each of them, put it down and ripped off the next. The bottom button weighed more than all the others together, and Apis looked at it very carefully.

“I don’t think I should set this one down too hard,” he said.

One of the other Thrushes came forward and took the little bomb away from him. Stepping most cautiously, he left the room quickly and returned to watch the rest of the inspection.

As the search went lower and became more embarrassing, Porpoise continued chatting. “You need try none of your clever tricks, Mr. Solo,

because you shan’t be harmed. Soon well just turn you loose, quite alive and in good health.” Napoleon stared in complete disbelief at that, and was taken aback as the floating head raised up slightly, opened one piercing eye, and stared at him.

“Yes, I’ve decided just to keep you awhile. Under questioning, you would have told me nothing, unless I chose to hypnotize, drug and dismember you. Such things revolt me, although I admit a strange interior fascination for them.

“But you are concerned that I not overextend myself in the stock market. Mr. Solo, with no torture at all you have told me that U.N.C.L.E. does not in the least suspect the methods I am using to do more than make a little money. They suspect nothing, far from being able to bring legal action against me. When we close out our stock transactions, I’ll abandon this comfortable site as well, and possibly buy Disneyland for a playground with my profits. I’ve always wanted to move to the coast, anyway.”

Indicating the whole Coney Island Thrush operation with a wave of one dripping hand, he said, “This doesn’t fool you for a moment, however. This is obviously too small to be Thrush’s entire New York base. Oh, we naturally have a finger in some of the arcades and sidewalk vendor concessions, but all that is operated from Manhattan, in secret in a location much like yours, but not hidden quite so complexly behind a tailor.” Napoleon winced, only partly from the treatment Apis was giving him in his search. This wasn’t the first time Thrush had said plainly that they knew the exact location of U.N.C.L.E/s New York headquarters.

“Long before your friends can locate you or whatever device you may have used to lead them,” said Porpoise, “we will have… Apis! What’s that on your belt?”

Apis whirled like a dog trying to catch its tail, and Arnold’s free hand lashed out, snatching at his partner’s belt.

The tiny tracer bug clattered to the tile floor and skidded towards Porpoise’s pool. Apis, continuing his spin, landed on it with one size sixteen sneaker.

He stood there triumphantly, like Goliath louting before the armies of Israel. In the instant that he allowed himself to stmt over the tracer's remains, Napoleon whipped free of Arnold and planted a foot square in Apis' seat. With a great waving of arms and a roar far beyond Porpoise's noise restrictions, Apis went off balance and toppled headlong into the water, raising a tidal wave and swamping his employer. The styrofoam pool toys were scattered on the waves, and water slopped up over the edges, drenching everyone's shoes.

Napoleon stood still, beaming happily at the havoc as Arnold recovered him and pinned both arms in a no-nonsense hold. All eyes in the room were turned on Porpoise's bobbing form as Apis climbed out of the pool. Sputtering and coughing, Porpoise inflated his chair's pontoons and raised himself up out of the water. He looked around, and let his gaze settle on Napoleon. Apis stood ready to shred the U.N.C.L.E. agent if his chubby chief would just give the word.

"Now, my dear Napoleon," said Porpoise as he regained his equilibrium, "what on Earth did you gain by that? You're securely locked in this room, and surely you didn't yearn to fight my entire crew? They wouldn't fight you one by one, you know; if Arnold hadn't grabbed you quickly, they'd have ganged up most unfairly, and held you until Apis could beat you to porridge. What was this all about?"

Napoleon smiled beatifically. "Let's be reasonable about this," he said. "You could do few things more horrible than lock me up for a few days and let me go. You act as if I have no importance whatever. I've lost slathers of ego, standing here while you dissected my assignment and worth, and your oversized friend got fresh with me. No torture, no brutal murder. A man has to have some outlet for his pride, Mr. Porpoise." He relaxed, slouching jauntily in Arnold's grip. "I'm an incurable pool pest, and at the very least I've accomplished a goal I set myself the minute I saw your setup."

With the whole house in his hand, he opened up the Solo smile full on the human beach ball paddling in front of him. "I sank your drink, didn't I?" he asked.

Porpoise sank back into the water, covering his eyes with one hand and waving the other feebly, to hasten Napoleon's departure. Arnold marched him past a dripping, frowning Apis, and down a corridor as Gambol squealed, "How did he get that thing on Apis' belt, anyway? Isn't it pretty suspicious, finding that thing there, on one of your own men?"

"Gambol, you are a low-life, a yellow, rum-dum underachiever. Solo led my men a pretty chase out there and tangled with all three of them. One of them may not recover from this particular beach party, but you took him with no risk and no fight. That was where he ought to have been searched, not after he's roughed up my men and had half a hundred chances to plant his tracer on someone." Porpoise's next words were lost to Napoleon in the twisting of corridors, but moments later he recognized Gambol's quavering, liquid yell.

"Judge not," he said to Arnold, "lest ye also be judged." Arnold looked at him stonily. "I read that in an old book," said Napoleon apologetically.

Once away from Porpoise's steam-bath climate the temperature dropped alarmingly. Arnold whisked his prisoner along in the increasing cold until the trip ended before a blank wall. Napoleon looked questioningly at his guide, and Arnold backed off to the far wall.

"When the door opens, step through and don't move once you get inside." He operated a hidden catch, and the wall developed a round seam that produced a circular door. The cut-out part of the wall rotated inward to reveal a cabin belonging between the stars.

The other side of the circular door was covered with wheels and levers. It looked like something from a bank safety-vault. The floor and walls were of even, glare-reducing linoleum, pleasantly off-white. On the slanted floor, on the walls and ceiling, Napoleon saw equally-spaced handholds. He realized the room was meant to suggest a trip under zero gravity, where a man might want to use any surface for a floor. Movement in free-fall would be a mere trifle with handholds every few feet.

Covering two walls, a control console spread itself in gadget-crazy confusion. Knobs, verniers, display panels, buttons, alarm-lights and

oscilloscopes were all dutifully labeled so that anyone, provided he could read and understand a hundred instructions, could operate the mockup spaceship. Out a fake porthole, stars flickered and occasionally a ringed planet, not looking much like Saturn, would disturb the imitation interstellar heavens, as the view made the ship seem to move.

"Almost any of those levers will move the porthole view faster, slower, or at an angle," said Arnold, "but none of them will open this spacelock door. We wouldn't want you stepping into the vacuum of outer space without a special suit-and Mr. Porpoise wouldn't want you leaving this room without his permission under any circumstances."

Hands in the pockets of his rumpled suit, Napoleon looked over his prison. He turned to Arnold, indicating with raised eyebrows the other door to the room, which seemed to be a way out.

"Yes, that's an exit. But we're fairly certain you won't try that way, because it goes through the Space Maze, the most confusing house of mirrors in Coney. Besides its normal difficulty, we have an added reason to believe you'll sit right here until we free you." He reached in his pocket and took out a Johnson quarter.

"When the power is on in this maze, it keeps the public amused with flashing lights, scurrying monsters and what we modestly call fourth-dimensional projections. When we turn on an additional power source, however, it becomes just the tiniest bit deadly." He showed Napoleon a slit of teeth meant to be a smile, and flipped his quarter through the room into the adjoining chamber.

The quarter hit one wall, and bounced down. As it landed, before it really touched the floor, it crossed unseen lines of current. A tiny flash was followed by the splitting of the entire floor along a precise line. The two parts of the floor slipped back into the wall, and Napoleon looked down through the opening to follow the fall of the coin.

A shudder gripped his whole frame as he stared down into the ocean at the tips and edges of a forest of knives. He half sprang, half fell back from the doorway as the floor slammed back together. Napoleon crouched down

to the floor of his wide-open prison, and stared at the floor in the next room, trying to count the blades in his memory of one brief glimpse into a hell specially designed for him. Each one seemed to be working its way into his flesh, and he sweated in the cold while the vision swept over his nervous system.

"You see," said Arnold, "we just don't want you to leave. You might dive across that floor at an angle to land in the next room, with some assurance that that floor won't split under you. But even though I designed this maze, it was long ago, and I wouldn't guarantee that the next room isn't highly charged with electricity, or that your slightest touch on a wall wouldn't release deadly gas." He sighed over the loss of his quarter, and turned to go. "Those knives have been lashed to this pier's pilings for many years." he said in afterthought. "You could catch lockjaw if any of them cut you. I really wouldn't advise you to try our maze at all." He stepped away from the spacelock door, and it swung to a solid close.

Chapter 6

“You’re using real bullets!”

“Frontal attack,” Illya said to himself. “They can teach all the sneak and secret classes they want at U.N.C.L.E. refresher sessions, but sometimes a spy has to get right out in the daylight and scare the bejeebers out of the enemy.” The marble and whitestone facade of Gambols office building loomed up at him from across the street as he backed the U.N.C.L.E. sedan into the alley a second time and slid out. Pedestrian traffic had increased since he’d fled backwards down that alley ten minutes earlier, but he threw out the idea of mixing with the crowd. He dodged across the busy streets like a salmon confused by the rush of traffic at spawning-time, and entered the building at speed.

His lockpick made it the work of a moment to jam both banks of elevators. The tiled floor led in two directions, and he picked the dimmer corridor almost without thinking about it. At the rear of the building he found and blocked the service elevator, leaving a large stool propped across the open door, with the out of service sign across it. With all routes but the stairs and the street door cut off, he felt a bit better about his chances of tackling the Gambol menagerie meaningfully.

Back up the dim cement and tile hall he turned and took the stairs three at a time. On the second floor things got dingier, but he hardly paused. With no one in sight, he kept on up the stairs, heading for Gambol’s fourth-floor office. The carpeting gave out, and metal runners did their best to trip him up as he moved on. On the next level, he saw a girl standing at the elevator bank, pushing the down button and tapping one foot.

“Frontal attack,” he muttered. One hand pushed his hair back reflexively as he sucked in a deep breath and stepped out toward her.

“Pardon me, Miss,” he said, “but are you with the local satrapy?”

She didn’t blink an eye as she turned from the elevator to smile at him. “I’ve got to admit that’s a new one,” she said. Her micro-second smile didn’t have a lot of warmth in it. “But I’m not part of the satrapy, and I don’t want to join the neighborhood seraglio, either. This is a lousy neighborhood; a girl can’t even get an elevator.” She turned back to push the down button again, jabbing it with a great deal of force. Illya wondered how Napoleon would have fared with the same problem, and backed off, excusing himself.

“Really, I meant something else,” he said. She kept turned away from him. “By the way, some idiot has turned all the elevators off. I’m afraid you’ll have to walk down.” He turned to leave.

“I’ve got a better idea,” she said simply. Illya turned back and found a tiny gun pointed squarely at his midriff. With one hand she snapped her purse shut, and motioned him toward the stairs. “Why don’t we both walk up a flight, Mr. Man from U.N.C.L.E., and I can apologize for lying to you while some friends of mine tie you to a chair and question you. Or do you want to question my marksmanship at point-blank range?” Her eyebrows were wavering as she tried to look determined to shoot.

“My dear young lady, I wouldn’t dream of arguing with your abilities with the charming little pistol.” Even while he was talking, Illya moved half a pace sideways as if to turn to the stairs, and he watched her eyebrows shoot up when his left knee buckled under him. In the middle of a spastic fall his arm lashed out and he snatched the gun, nearly dislocating her trigger finger before she could move. He recovered from the collapse in a spry jig step, reversed the pistol and calmly removed its bullets. “The safety was on,” he said sorrowfully. “I wish I’d known that, because half the problem was turning it the second I took hold, to keep you from firing while my tummy was in the way.”

“Of course the safety was on!” she spat. “You didn’t have to be so rough. I only wanted to take you upstairs for questioning, and you nearly broke my hand. I wasn’t going to shoot you or anything!” She nursed her bruised finger, frowning at him.

“You still aren’t going to shoot me or anything.” He handed her back the cleared weapon, and turned to the stairs. “Point that at my back and herd me up there. Remember, if you tip off your friends that I’m not your prisoner, there’s liable to be a gunfight with you slam in the middle of it”

They went up to the fourth floor, and into Gambol’s office, side by side. The girl played her part well, keeping the empty automatic pointed fiercely at Illya. One of the toughs who had chased him down the alley met them at the door; the other two were across the room, and another man sat at Gambols desk. With more than he had counted on against him, Illya went back into the frontal attack mode.

The U.N.C.L.E. Special fell into his hand as he pushed the girl into the room past the startled Thrush. Karl, showing more in the way of guts than brains, tried to outdraw Illya from a foot away, and collected a steel-jacketed slug for his efforts. Frank, backing his partners play, caught two more bullets, one in the shoulder, and one to shatter the wrist that might have aimed his pistol. The third man froze, holding his hands well away from his sides. Illya spun the wounded Karl around and sent him sprawling into the room after the girl.

“You’re using real bullets!” she accused in a betrayed whine.

“You and your little friends here were using real bullets, weren’t you?” Illya asked as he frisked the third hood.

“That’s different, you’re not supposed to be using real bullets, everyone knows that U.N.C.L.E. agents use mercy bullets.”

“I prefer the real thing for close work, like this. The mercy bullets are all right, but they just don’t act fast enough sometimes. I’m really not in any sort of mood to have these three plug-uglies perforate me while I try to play nice. If this is a real life and death affair, you two may as well come out shooting, otherwise, I’d appreciate it if you would just kick those guns over here.”

The two wounded Thrush watched their blood flow for a minute, and then decided that Illya had position on them all the way. “Do we get the

Geneva Convention?" asked one, unbuckling a shoulder holster.

"Last time I heard," said Illya, "the Hierarchy was not among Geneva's signatories. I can possibly guarantee not to use mustard gas, but we do want a bit more than your name, rank and serial number. Slide them out here so I can pick them up, and then we'll snoop around for something to wrap you up comfortably."

"We haven't got anything; besides, Karl and Frank are bleeding."

"Oh, you must have something useful for tying people up. After all, you promised to tie me up. I'm sure we can find something that will do; some adhesive tape perhaps, and we can make it double for first-aid. Sitting still in a good posture is excellent for flesh wounds, so we'll tie Tweedledum and Tweedledee here firmly into those straight-back chairs."

While the girl was working apathetically on bonds for her pals, Illya pulled out his communicator and called in to report to his headquarters. His progress ended with a request for Napoleon's whereabouts.

"I can't stay here and watch this lot all night ," he said. "The girl has tied them so ineptly that I think I'll have to do it all over again as soon as I tie her up. It would be an excellent idea for someone else to come out here and stand guard or search the place, while I take off after our decoy. He could be halfway around the world by now, strapped buck naked out on an anthill or tied to a railroad track."

"An investigatory team will coordinate with you within the quarter hour, Mr. Kuryakin," replied Waverly. "They will be prepared to handle your five captives and administer a measure of first-aid. The information we gathered from Mr. Solo's search today has been quite illuminating, and it's vital that we delve into the mysteries of Mr. Gambol's business with all possible dispatch."

"Yes, sir. But Napoleon can still be assumed active in the search, and I think I ought to start chasing his yellow blip."

“Mr. Solo is secondary in importance now,” said Waverly. Illya looked at the fountain-pen communicator, considering things he could say to his chief about throwing a man into something and then not going in after him. He decided not saying them was a better idea. It was altogether too possible that Napoleon was cold meat now, anyway, and the job had to be done.

Waverly’s relayed voice kept its steady tone, businesslike and unflinching. “He could hardly have risen to his post with this organization if he had not shown a remarkable capacity for getting out of as well as getting into trouble. Without some link, proof of a connection between the numerous investors and someone in Thrush, we have no basis for acting in the matter of Breelen’s common stock; Mr. Solo knows this, and wherever he is he is probably working to help us establish that connection. We know many of the names of the investors after today’s analyses of broker records, but there’s nothing we can do yet; there is no law in this country against capitalism.”

“Understood, sir.”

“While you’re waiting for the crew to arrive, may I suggest you finish your crossword puzzle? You really should not have let Mr. Solo convince you that ‘A Petty Annoyance’ is ‘Crossword Puzzle.’ It’s ‘Minor Irritation,’ a rather more ordinary, if less amusing, solution.”

Illya settled down to wait, with one eye on the Thrushes and the other on his crossword puzzle. The solution Waverly gave him changed three he had incorrectly filled in, and the puzzle was nearly completed when a group of capable looking young men with attache cases and U.N.C.L.E. Specials arrived to take over for him.

The prisoners were bundled off by two of the young men, and the rest started to take the Gambol filing system and offices apart in a methodical way designed to process every bolt, fingerprint and dust-mote in the area. The Type Two search was generally considered the finest field analysis that could be brought to bear with equipment at the portable stage.

“Open Channel D, please,” Illya requested as he returned to the street. He was eager to start playing the Great White Hunter again.

“Yes, Mr. Kuryakin. We have Mr. Solo pinpointed for you. He’s apparently much closer than halfway around the globe; he seems to be at Coney Island. His tracker was taken there directly, and then it bounced around for a bit. But the latest report is—excuse me! My monitor shows that yours is the only tracer left active. Mr. Solo’s yellow blip has vanished. Perhaps you had better get out to Coney Island quickly; with today’s upsets the future of our operation re Breelen’s common may depend on it.”

“The future of Breelen’s?” Illya asked no one in particular. “What about Napoleon’s future?” He pulled out into snarled traffic and headed towards Brooklyn. He gave only a part of his attention to his bumper-to-bumper traffic negotiations with people going home late. Most of his mind was centered on the question, “Does Napoleon have a future?” He finally managed to break free in some one-way traffic; fighting the signals down Manhattan was a bigger problem at times than fighting Thrush.

The wait at the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel wasn’t phenomenal, but he was losing the last of his patience as he crept forward. Beeping from his communicator came as a welcome break to purgatory on wheels.

“Mr. Kuryakin, our preliminary search of Gambol and Associates has failed to tie any of the names we have gathered to Thrush in any way. The only answers we are liable to get may be at Coney Island, whether Mr. Solo is still operating there or not. Proceed at all possible speed. Communications informs me your car is hardly moving.” Waverly actually sounded excited over the airwaves.

“Proceeding at all possible speed as ordered,” said Illya. “It’s just that, at the moment, possible and minimal are synonymous. You said earlier that a ‘large number’ of investors was involved, sir. Just how many makes up a ‘large number’? How many Thrushes am I out to find evidence against?”

“It seems to be slightly short of five thousand. We have collected the names of almost five thousand investors who will carry off a huge profit for Thrush unless you and Mr. Solo manage to come up with something at Coney Island. Naturally, we can discount some small number as legitimate investors who simply took a ride on the Reading, as it were. But individual

briefs, prepared in the case of each one of these several thousands suspected of criminal activity, will keep us busy for many months." Waverly's matter-of-fact recounting of numbers, skipping lightly over the matter of Napoleon, rankled Illya as he crept forward in the Tunnel traffic pattern.

"About a third of this group, and their cohorts in London, forced Breelen's up to nearly sixty-three," continued Waverly, "and then they sold. Not only sold-they sold short. When the price reached sixty-two and seven-eighths, the orders poured in so fast that I'm told the tape was running over an hour behind."

"The tape was what? What tape?"

"The securities ticker-tape. It was running an hour behind the actual transactions on the floor of the Exchange, simply because Breelen's was being traded in thousands of small odd-lot sales. Our man in Finance was very impressed."

An opening appeared in the traffic ahead, and Illya put the U.N.C.L.E. sedan through it. A squeal of brakes at his rear told him some less fortunate driver had just missed the same hole. Then the nickel dropped.

"Mr. Waverly!"

"Yes," his chief answered.

"That price. You said sixty-two and seven-eighths. If you found a seven letter word for 'Arctic Oil Source' with the middle letters 'RWH,' could you fill in the block of words surrounding 62 across in that puzzle?"

"I finished that some time ago, Mr. Kuryakin. 'An Arctic Oil Source' is 'Narwhal,' and . .

"Exactly. And with that, I can solve 62 across. A five letter word completing 'The Magnificent—' is 'Seven.' And 62 down is 'Cake or Stop.' The answer to that has to be 'Short.' The puzzle tells you to sell short at sixty-two and seven-eighths!"

Anything further Illya might have said was lost as his message was cut off by the solid walls of the Battery Tunnel; he had finally made it in, and his chief was left with a dead communicator.

Waverly sat back in the straight chair he preferred at his desk. One hand flicked open a line to U.N.C.L.E. Cryptoanalysis; the other searched through the mound of files and papers in front of him for a copy of the puzzle. Both hands got results simultaneously-the blank puzzle form and a voice from his desk communicator that said, “Crypto here, sir.”

“One of our agents has just suggested that we correlate the Thrush activity on the Stock Exchange with the morning paper’s crossword puzzle” he said.

“What?” The voice from Cryptoanalysis was guarded. A request for solutions to the Kaiser’s intimate code, and improvements on the code itself, would be answered in minutes, but every now and then Crypto thought the old man had taken leave of his grip on reality.

“Get on it right away, will you? Go back a few months, and see if the puzzle could be used to transmit information.” Waverly signed off and turned back to the myriad papers before him. Two floors below, a tall bony Negro turned his desk communicator carefully to off, and stared blankly at the wall while he tried to remember if this was the wildest pipe-dream he’d ever been assigned to track down, and if Waverly was the wackiest boss he’s ever worked for.

Two pretty girls giggling behind him broke off his muttering. He turned and faced them, trying to look severe. “You heard the man. Get your behinds in gear, sisters, and let’s crack the Crossword Puzzle Caper and save the world.”

The girls stopped giggling. The pixie-faced blonde spun a rotary file open to crossword, cf., and followed the references to the morning daily. The redhead fed the visual unit at her side a magna-chip each time one was handed to her from the records.

Each chip was read and the thousands of bits of data thereon were flashed to the huge U.N.C.L.E. computer on the floor below. A run-code notified the computer that a Code Four priority situation existed, and a rat's-nest of integrated circuits reached out electronically to queue up the autocorrelation program for immediate time-sharing. The Central Processing Unit blithely kept working on six other jobs while the data came in, making no great effort at solving the problem until several month's puzzles were stored on drum.

The girl at the rotary file had keyed in instructions to set the correlation in motion, leading it to each day's puzzle. By the time six months of newspapers had been scanned the computer was over two-thirds committed to the problem with interim solutions stacked up on drums awaiting a later pass.

The Negro section chief stopped his girls there. "Just that much," he said. "You know what Data Processing is going to say about tying up this much machine time. Wait'll they find out what it's for." Suddenly a light seemed to explode over his head, and inspiration spread in an expression of shock on his face.

He pulled out a listing of the autocorrelator and replaced his girls at the remote console. With one hand he keyed in a crash Halt instruction that stopped his program while with the other hand he riffed through the listing until he found what he wanted. In thirty seconds he had keyed in half a dozen instructions and restarted the giant computer system, but not before his desk communicator had come alive.

"Dean, you clumsy feather-merchant—" bleated the radio. The head of Crypto put his hand on the send only switch and talked soothingly into it.

"Your little erector-set will be all right, Johnny. I only clobbered the processor for the time it took to enter a couple instructions."

"Brother, you don't demand Conversational mode from a system like this with no warning! Don't you know enough to let the job terminate, and then make a re-run? Taking a free hand like that is going to cost everybody, you games-playing idiot."

“Now, that’s talk unbecoming a department head,” said Dean. “I’ve got the priority from Mister Man himself, and I think even you’ll agree it was worth the interruption to keep the computer from solving crossword puzzles.”

“Solving what? To keep the computer from what?”

“I put in an autocor to—so help me—find out if the daily crossword is mixed up in a Thrush gambit. Just as the program got its teeth into the first pass at my data, I realized that any correlation worth its salt would solve the puzzles too. You can’t find out if there’s secrets in ‘em unless you know the answers. Before that tied us up for hours or maybe days, I tore into the program and told it to find the solution in the next day’s paper.”

The communicator buzzed, and clicked off with no comment. Below, the computer continued its complicated path through the data.

Five correlations were noted on the program’s first pass. One, every puzzle of any interest was signed “Avery D. Porpoise” as originator. Two, all these puzzles were cast in roughly the same format. 3, 4, and 5 were definitions common to many puzzles: A third of the puzzles asked the question “Who was Peer Gynt’s mother?” and a third each included the definitions “A Legume” and “A Celebes Ox.” The system suspended operations on the newspaper files and worked on other programs while the Crypto team prepared a magna-chip of instructions to follow up all but item number two.

“Everybody knows that crosswords come in pretty much the same pattern,” said the blonde. “It’s a lot harder to make them up if your pattern is wandering all over the place.”

“Computers don’t ordinarily waste time solving crosswords,” Dean answered. “It’s fine for you to know that this Porpoise is only playing the game by all the rules of puzzle-makers, but that machine downstairs can’t tell the difference in importance between that correlation and the one that tells us that Porpoise is our man “

The second run found another two correlations in the selected puzzles: There was a number or a figure in the solutions of every puzzle signed Avery Porpoise, and the words “Buy,” “Sell” or “Short” were also constants; every puzzle contained one of the three words.

Output was selected, and ten pages of data rattled off the remote line printer like machine gun fire. The printout was sealed in a flat case, and the redhead carried it personally upstairs to the office where a dozen people were working on the information Napoleon and Illya had gathered during the day. When the dates and numbers were added to the information, a wave of relief passed through the room.

The list of names compiled from buying and selling records broke into three groups, their purchases matching the dates of the puzzles tightly. Quick glances at the prices checked out the clue that had put Illya on the track: when a Porpoise puzzle appeared, at least one third of the investors found their key definition in it, and solved the puzzle. Their instructions were there, and the actual point of transaction was spelled out as a number from zero to seven in a block whose number was the dollars part of each deal. 1 By the time Illya pulled out of the Tunnel, Waverly could tell him his hunch had paid off.

Chapter 7

“This hairbreadth stuff has got to stop.”

Napoleon watched the spacelock close until Arnold and his sick smile were completely shut from sight. Sadists like that make me wish I could transfer to a job with a friendly atmosphere, like cab-driving. He sure gets a kick out of locking people up and flexing his death-traps. Never inclined to take the enemy’s advice, Napoleon decided to see for himself, despite the knives, just how deadly the Space Maze could be.

He started from the spacelock-door in a crouch and made a running leap, clearing the next room and its sliding trapdoor completely. The next alcove was walled with glass and steel, mirrors reflecting mirrors with a hundred Napoleon Solo forms poised on all sides of him, hair disarrayed and every muscle ready to bounce when the next trap was sprung.

Two openings seemed to lead from the little room when he screwed up his vision to eliminate false doors in the reflections. He reached a hand towards one, carefully feeling his way. His fingers brushed glass where there should have been air, and he jerked back in pain. The glass was like fire.

The whole room was heating up, he realized. Not the muggy, drowning heat of the swimming-pool room where Porpoise lolled in ugly luxury, but a dry, baking heat that was less obvious. His skin prickled, and the fine hairs in his ears and nostrils seemed to vibrate. At the edges of his hearing he sensed a roar, a whining buzz, sounds that he couldn’t focus on or really be certain he even heard. He began to sweat. The heat in the center of the room was becoming unbearable, but near the walls there was nearly as much of it, a great physical thing that ground sweat and salt out of him.

Great globes of liquid formed on his hands and arms and brow, and as the heat increased they drew into smaller globes, finally drying on him even

as his system pumped more water out. Under his clothes he felt like a walking swamp.

Fire coursed down his leg and sprinkled jingling across the, floor. The coins Apis had left him had literally burned a hole in his pocket and rolled away. Several rolled through the other opening he had been about to follow, bouncing from mirror to mirror. The entire next room suddenly disappeared in a shower of exploding glass as one of the coins rolled against a wall. Tiny fragments of the stuff passed Napoleon, others cut small gashes in his clothing. By some quirk, none actually cut his flesh.

“Those teeth are pulled,” he murmured, staring in awe at the debacle just next door. If he’d gotten into that room before his pocket change had, he might have brushed the exploding mirror as lightly as he’d touched one in the sweat-bath room.

He reached for one of his coins, thinking to use an advance scout again, but fumbled it as his fingers were seared. “Oh well. I didn’t really want to get through here the easy way anyhow,” he whispered as he sucked the injured fingers. He was very careful not to touch anything as he peered carefully through the door to the next room, and found himself looking down a glowing walkway in darkness. There were planets and stars reflected from floor, walls and ceiling.

Napoleon carefully placed a foot on the walkway, and-shock! Current shot up through his leg to arc from his fingers and hair in a pyrotechnical display of high voltage. Against his will one hand clutched the doorway, and a path opened for the current-up his right leg, through the trunk, down his left arm and out the hand. Somehow he kept his head clear, but he knew that a very few moments of this would burst his heart.

He put his whole soul into the only muscles he had that could save him. Writhing out of control in two-thirds of his body, he still had control over his left leg. Quickly, he made the left knee unlock and collapse, until his weight brought him down on the right. He kicked out, swinging his body off balance, and fell backwards onto the field of glass shards. He lay there twitching in reaction to the electricity, and forced new air into his screamed-dry lungs.

Somewhat shakily, he got up from the broken glass and faced the dark pathway again. He squatted into a set of kneebends to bring back coordination in the electrocuted muscles, breathed deeply, and brushed himself clean of glass.

“You’ll have to go back and start it over again, Solo,” said Arnold’s voice from above. A steel door slammed down, cutting off all access to the deadly walkway. Napoleon sat down to stare at it, to wait for Arnold to raise it again or to try to figure out a way through or around it. There was nothing visible forward, but he knew what faced him back in the Space Ship Room if he didn’t give this maze his all.

“Didn’t you understand me?” asked his unseen jailor. “You are to go back to your starting place now. Here’s something to convince you.” The persuader was a set of openings in the ceiling that boiled out a fine brownish mist. It almost had to be chlorine, and that wasn’t something he wanted to stay and find out about for sure. He stepped back into the furnace room, hoping it had cooked a bit since he had last been through.

The heat fooled him at first as he moved to the center of the room. The air was only mildly warm, and he wondered if the beams had turned off. Just a half-pause in the center cured him of that idea-as he became the focus for the ultrasonic blasts, he was forced against the still scorching walls, finding the mirrors hotter than they had been before. He sidled around the room, his only chance to remain uncooked being a hasty retreat to the Space Ship Room. The heat was draining him of strength and body fluid as sweat dried all over him, continually being sucked from his system.

He threw himself into a leap that carried him back over the dreaded knives, rolling safely into the futuristic room. The chill of outdoors hit him again but it soothed him after the soundless oven he’d crossed. His strength returned, and he faced back to the trapdoor room, staring bitterly into the inferno beyond. He heard the steel shutter open, tauntingly, tempting him to try again.

“You had better wait a couple more minutes, Solo,” came the voice from above. Napoleon stared up at the ceiling. “It will take a few minutes to

clear the gas, and for the next room to cool down. You did remarkably well for a first try. We're betting on you to get all the way up to the laser beam next time."

"I suppose you're watching the whole thing?" Napoleon asked conversationally, wishing he had something to drink.

"I'm monitoring the maze on our console. Each room lights up as you enter it, and if you trigger any of the traps I read their signals, so you might say I'm watching the whole thing."

"Too bad. If you were getting a real strong picture, I could manage some shuffle-off-to-Buffalo at the end of each skit, to brighten your evening viewing. How about some second-boy-from-the-right kicks? I've got a whole raft of vaudeville routines available, which you can record for presentation at a more convenient time."

"No, I'll just enjoy thinking about it. The viewscreen is unfortunately tied up right now by Mr. Porpoise. He's making some calls to ensure that your investigations don't get any of our other people upset. And later he'll want to watch us dispose of Gambol off the pier end, so probably you'll just be a bunch of lights to me."

"Sorry I can't delight you with my glass-dodging hootch dance, then. I'm just beginning to enjoy this maze. High hopes for high times to come. Do you toast me in champagne if I make it all the way through?"

"You get a winner's horseshoe of flowers, just like at the races. But how did you beat the exploding mirror? I saw it trigger, and I thought that would get you for sure, unless U.N.C.L.E. agents come sheathed in steel."

"As the robot actress said to the bishop," said Napoleon, "I wouldn't want you to overestimate me, Arnold. Your ultrasonics heated my small change, and skill and science did the rest. With your maze working for me like that, I may get through yet."

"You really have me worried, Solo." Arnold's voice had turned harsh. "There are over thirty ways for you to kill yourself in that maze, and I don't

think you'll luck your way past all of them. Oh, by the way, since you sank his drink, Mr. Porpoise told me to tell you that you can have all you want to drink." Napoleon couldn't help but be interested in this offer. "All you have to do is step into the next room. Ha!" The floor over the knives slid open again, revealing the cold Atlantic and the many-bladed platform reaching up through the water. "Just step in there, and you can have all the water you'll ever want." The floor, triggered from Arnold's console, snapped shut again.

Knives had held a special horror for Napoleon ever since his encounter with the mad Dr. Adams who had nearly succeeded in getting him to perform his own execution in a nightmare room full of kitchen cutlery. Sitting tailor-fashion in the Space Ship Room, Napoleon felt the memory of that piercing, stomach churning day run through him. He wasn't blindfolded now, and his hands weren't tied, but he still had no great urge to fall into the Atlantic through a jungle of foot-long rusted steel blades.

His thirst grew as he sat, staring at the floor of the next room, seeing the knives beyond it. What use was there in trying the maze again, with Arnold monitoring his every move, and with bigger and better traps to come? "Out of the frying pan and into the fire, for real," he muttered glumly as he lifted his gaze to the furnace room. "Hey, wait one. Why not into the water? Out of the frying pan and into the water would be a new twist."

"You ready to try again, Solo?" Arnold broke in from above. "The ultrasonics room is cooled off now, and I've triggered a second line of traps in the exploding mirror room. You ought to have a real ball this time."

Napoleon ignored the intrusion. He reached into his pockets, but the furnace-room hadn't left him any small change. His belt, he thought; the buckle might do to trigger the trap.

Swiftly he took off both belt and pants, pressing the latter out flat. He took one pantsleg and folded it over once and then started rolling the leg up toward the inseam. He smoothed the waist and seat into the roll and then continued down the other leg until he got to the knee. Holding the coil of pants, he snapped it out straight in one easy motion. The pants unrolled perfectly, and Napoleon quickly rolled them back into a tight coil. The

remaining foot and a half he wrapped tightly around his left arm. He laced his shoes tightly, for the protection he hoped they would give him in the climb to come.

He leaped across the deadly trap again; pausing not at all in the furnace-room, he passed into the room of shattered mirror. The glass nozzles started hissing, but Napoleon, holding his breath, picked up as many of the large shards as he could find and made of them two piles. He tossed the first pile onto the glowing walkway. Sparks danced over the slivered glass. The second pile he took back with him into the ultrasonics room.

Let's hope these will keep enough of Arnold's lights flashing to keep him confused, he thought as he scattered the mirror fragments around the heating walls. He faced the trapdoor room and prepared himself for the final step in his plan.

"I hope it doesn't insist on copper quarters," he said aloud, hoping to cause Arnold just that much more confusion, as he flipped the belt into the adjoining room. The electricity flickered briefly, and once again the floor yawned to reveal a sea spiked with ugly death.

In that instant that the electric charge turned off, just as the trapdoor slammed apart to empty his belt into the brine, he dived through the opening in a whiplash twist that had to be invented as it was being performed. Before his body was fully through the trap, he brought his left arm full around, sending the rolled trousers whipping straight up into the room above.

The trap closed, catching the last few inches of out-flung pantsleg. Napoleon hung in a curled ball, scant inches above a crisscross of razor-edged death. "I wish cuffs were in style this year," he muttered as he swung himself in a growing arc on his improvised trapeze. A ripping sound, and a sudden lack of pull on the supporting left arm sent him spinning above the knives. He reached madly for the piling that had been his target.

"This hairbreadth stuff has got to stop." Again, he was scant inches above death, but this time with both arms and legs wrapped tightly around the wet, slimy, algae covered, most welcome piling in the whole world.

Napoleon climbed, shinny style, up and around the piling, only to find that Arnold's field of knives extended for another dozen feet, clear to the edge of the pier. The next closest piling was at least ten feet away, just inside the border of the blades, and far outside his leaping range under the circumstances.

"Now what, o miraculous magi? Do you disappear in a puff of smoke? Or walk across the ceiling? Or maybe hang by your thumbs? The ceiling?" Napoleon tentatively reached out to an eight-inch beam transversing the pier. Just maybe he could support himself between the beams. The remains of the pants he wrapped more tightly around his left arm. The right would have to make do with the protection of the jacket he still wore.

Twisting once more to a face down position, and keeping himself supported on the piling with his back and bare legs, he reached both arms as far out along the beams as he dared. The knives, well below him now, had never looked closer or more hungry. The sweat of fear stung his eyes and froze him in a spider posture, already uncomfortable to his straining limbs.

This is no time to get glued to one spot, he decided firmly, and certainly not the place for it. By sheer force of will he managed to squirm and crawl forward between the beams until his body was stretched out away from the piling. The beams were just too far apart for Napoleon to use his elbows and upper arms to bridge between them. This put them too close together for him to use his hands. So pressing outward against the two beams with both forearms, shoulders creaking with the strain of supporting his 180 pounds, he slowly worked his feet and legs up off the piling and into a similar spread-eagle position.

With every move of his legs his knees were tom by the splintery beams, and his buttocks threatened to launch him downward through their contacts with the planking above. Both legs were bloody, and his shoes slipped constantly rather than grasping as bare feet might have. Napoleon worked his legs forward to crowd his trembling shoulders against his aching arms. There was now nothing at all between him and the knives below except the pressure he was exerting on the two eight inch beams.

Eons later, the jacket worn through, blood dripping freely and soaking both the cloth and the beam, Napoleon had worked himself four feet out from the piling, and years closer to his grave. Thwamm! The trap behind him slammed open, and nearly undid all of his work. He froze again, his muscles locked in a panic cramp.

“Arnold,” the voice of Apis bellowed out, “he ain’t down here.”

“What? He must be-look again.”

Napoleon sent up a fervent prayer to the patron saint of spies that Apis wouldn’t look anywhere but at the knives below, and waited for another eternity.

“Honest, Arnold, there isn’t anyone down there. He must not have fallen through after all.”

“Then he must still be in the maze. Come on.”

The trap door slid closed again, and Napoleon gasped, partly in relief, partly from the pain he was forced to endure. Slowly, he inched one limb and then another forward, every foot gained meaning another pound of flesh spent. Finally he forced first one and then the other of his numb yet aching hands into the crevice formed by the joining of the straight beams with the curved piling. He had crossed the ten feet, defying both death and gravity.

Deeper and deeper into the narrowing slots he forced his powerless fingers and palms. Finally, satisfied, he lessened the pressure on his legs and fell forward onto the piling. His legs flew apart, the straining muscles relieved of the pressure refusing to answer his brain’s command. Try as he might he couldn’t force them around the piling. His hands and the rough wood gouging into their flesh were his only support. Slowly he mastered his muscles again; his shoes, now in a position to be of use, cut grooves with their leather soles into the algae covering the piling.

I may not live through this, hut at least the hard part is done. I congratulate you o miraculous magi; you have pulled it off again. Napoleon

worked his way painfully around the second piling until his back was to the open sea. The field of knives, five feet below, extended not more than two feet from his point of vantage.

If Thrush has taken the trouble to mine the entire Atlantic for falling spies, I suppose I'm still in trouble. With all the strength he could put into a final push with his legs, he leaped far out into the icy water.

His wrists were still bleeding from the bottle that had cut his bonds, and both hands were badly slashed by splinters. His right arm and both legs were deeply lacerated, his left arm lacerated too, but not to the same scale. When the freezing salt water hit his wounds the pain fled instantly, but his agonized muscles rebelled at the shock. Napoleon cramped as a swimmer had never cramped before.

He felt himself drawn up into a hard knot of fiery freezing pain as he sank like a dead weight into the sea.

Chapter 8

“Sorry to shoot and run.”

Three of the four streetlights were knocked out. The fourth lit a small portion of street, lone sentry in the last block of Coney Island’s attempts at a city by the boardwalk. Kind of sad, thought Illya. Probably only a matter of time before some kid lets fly with a rock; maybe if they break that one, too, the city will have to put up new lights.

He parked the gray U.N.C.L.E. sedan directly beneath the light. He always preferred to look ‘normal’ with that car. He had long ago discovered that any attempt to stay out of sight-such as parking in the dark here-brought up every curious bystander. In the glare from the only streetlight the streamlined sedan would be too obvious to be worth gawking at.

The chill of evening grew deeper as he walked away from the car toward the ocean. Cold wind off the water made him wish his jacket were a topcoat, but he zipped it up and kept his chin down to make the best of things. To cap the unpleasant temperature, the warm-voiced girl in Communications was trying to tell him they were unable to pinpoint Napoleon.

“But why is that?” he snapped. It was little comfort to talk to a personal communicator when you wanted to shake somebody, or get your hands on the computer that was causing all the problem. “When we left this morning the system would all but write down addresses of anyone we visited. If I had the expensive computer layout you have, I’d crack the whip with it. No computer of mine would say I don’t know,’ ” It did his temper no good to keep thinking about the hour lost in Gambol’s office with Napoleon being trundled out here by Thrush. Much too much could have happened in that hour. And, as Waverly would have added, the lost time was helping Thrush clean up its trail; the whole stock affair was getting further out of control each moment now that they knew U.N.C.L.E. was out after them.

“When we lost his signal, you and Mr. Solo were so widely separated that we had reduced the scale a very great deal,” she said. “He was apparently doing quite a bit of moving around, because the map was shifting back and forth, and going up and down rapidly.

“Up and down?” Illya looked at his communicator quizzically.

“Yes, sir. The altitude of his blip went from sea-level to the height you are at presently-we have determined that that is the boardwalk. Then it went up quickly, and down like a shot, with considerable lateral movement. Just as it quieted down and we started to triangulate, his signal stopped and yours became the primary.” She sounded miserable about that part of it. “The display jumped to you, and we weren’t ready for it. Four of us were sitting in front of the display console watching it and taking readings off known landmarks. But before we could get anything or even record the picture, all we had was your blip in Manhattan. All w know is that Mr. Solo was on the waterfront, right at sea level, and the picture sort of looked like it does now. Where are you.”

“Sort of,” he said scathingly. There was no answer.

He walked down a short flight of stairs from the promenade to the beach and began a reconnaissance in approved manner. The Atlantic looked forbidding under the stars, flat and entirely unappealing. As far as he could see along the beach, there was nowhere to hide Napoleon. He supposed he might look for a submarine conning-tower poking through the surface of Lower Bay, or search the sand for a Thrush picnic outing. Anything, never mind how ridiculous, would scratch the itch he was building up to have some kind of tangle with the black-hats. At least it would help warm him up.

Over his communicator, the girl back at U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters tried to apologize to him and cheer him up. “You know were all heartsick about not being able to help you and Mr. Solo. It’s an experimental linkage of the computer to a map-display, and we feel horrible about letting it snap out of our control like that. All of us are going to stay right on it until we can identify the last picture he sent against your whereabouts.”

“All well and good,” grumbled Illya, “but you don’t have to work this end of it.” He knew right away he shouldn’t have said that.

“Oh, Mr. Kuryakin, I wish I had the opportunity to get a beach excursion as part of my job. We’re shut up here in a room full of wires and transistors, while you’re out in all that fresh air, away from the grit of midtown air. You Enforcement people just don’t know how lucky you are.”

I could shut her off, he thought. One finger could snap the communicator to off, and leave him out on the beach without even a smart-aleck girl to talk to. He kept trudging along, and decided to give as good as he got.

“Personally, I would love to be trapped in that warm, homey Comm laboratory, surrounded by coffee smells and stagnant old air conditioning air.” He stopped walking and stood on one leg to empty wet sand from his shoe. “You have my personal recommendation to the Enforcement Section, Miss. If you’re eligible for transfer, just trip right on over there. Tell them you want a job patrolling a frozen stretch of waterfront in November without even knowing what to look for.”

Suddenly the boardwalk curved away to give Illya a longer view down the beach, and he stopped. Ahead he saw an amusement pier with all lights blazing. He moved into the shadows under the boardwalk and spoke urgently into the communicator.

“This is where it’s at,” he said. Before he was finished with that much the girl who’d been bantering with him reacted to the change in his voice. His communicator clicked twice, and he was linked through the monitor on Waverly’s desk. “Ahead of me is a so-called fun center, lights on on all sides without a soul around. There’s a car pulled up near it with its rear doors open. Do you think somebody was in that much of a hurry to visit Coney?”

“No, Mr. Kuryakin, I don’t. Generally there is no activity on the beach at this time of year. A brightly illuminated public building at night is highly suspect.”

Illya moved in closer, trying to keep his attention on the fun house and his communicator, while at the same time not walking into the pillars he was using for cover. Waverly spoke again.

“Identify your position, please, Mr. Kuryakin, so that our people in Communications can use local maps to orient themselves. Can you tell us which amusement pier this is?”

“Yes, sir,” he said, crouching behind a dune. “I’m under the boardwalk, so I can’t see which street runs to the beach here, but it seems the building has enough identification on it to satisfy everyone. If you can believe this, it is labeled on the side toward me, ‘The Hilarious, Rollicking, Unparalleled Space House.’ “He had to repeat that for his chief before he was allowed to continue.

“That name figures in bright red and yellow lettering, in a typeface made famous by the late Phineas T. Barnum. If the smallest punctuation mark in it is less than a foot across, your humble and obedient servant will willingly eat his sweatshirt. The initial letters are a gaudy, ten-foot-high spellout just waiting for someone to link them up with our feathered friends.” He crept forward, keeping well down behind what little cover he could find.

“Please don’t become hasty regarding your sweatshirt, Mr. Kuryakin,” said Waverly. “We may assume Thrush is aware that advertising benefits everyone. Besides, if the temperature and weather reports on that beach may be believed you will have good use for that sweatshirt tonight. Our Meteorology Department tells me that the hurricane Quiggy, although not another disaster like 1965’s Betsy, has turned a cold front toward you, and the temperature where you’re standing is already down to thirty-one. I trust you will not have to endure that sort of weather for long.”

“Yes, sir. I can’t exactly knock on Thrush’s front door and ask shelter from inclement weather, though.” He tried beating himself with one arm to keep warm while holding the communicator, and found it as unsatisfactory as clapping with one hand.

“Well, I’m certainly pleased we turned up something,” said Waverly, “even if it is so impertinently scrawled across the beach for everyone to see.”

The Communications Department Head interrupted just then. “Excuse me, sir, but Mr. Kuryakin has now oriented himself very nearly where Mr. Solo was earlier this evening. All of us who were watching the map then agree that this is where we were looking when the other blip went out.”

“Very good,” said Waverly. “This establishes a definite link between that technicolor Thrush building and our friend Mr. Gambol. Now if we can only use his records to generate some evidence against the investors who worked with him, we just may have a case.”

“Why do we need more of a case than we have?” asked Illya. “This is where Thrush is, we know Gambol came here, and they probably have Napoleon inside. With the puzzles split wide open, haven’t we wrapped the whole thing up?”

Waverly sighed into the communicator. “I’m very much afraid our Finance and Legal sections are recommending we remain silent, based on information we now have. At present we have five thousand investors who can be categorized by the threefold code system Porpoise used to direct his operations, but we have no proof that they really were using this extraordinary procedure. If we have the S.E.G. step in, we’ll stop things but lose everyone. If we take them to court the best we can hope for is years of litigation and counter-suits. What would a judge say if we told him your amusement-park people were spreading stock-market information through a newspaper crossword? How many times has the gold market been cornered that way in the past?”

“We’d be a laughing-stock.” Illya looked glumly at the communicator and at the ridiculous building lighting up the beach in front of him.

“Decidedly,” said Waverly. “Unfortunately, we turned up nothing really conclusive in our search of the brokerage and all the other tenants of that building seem to be pleasantly, honestly secure in unrelated businesses. All we have is our list of suspects, and our own very certain knowledge that

they’re bilking the Exchange in connivance with Thrush. It’s up to you to help us get them all behind bars.”

Behind a pillar of the boardwalk Illya stood up and scanned the area. “I think I can get from here down to the pier without much risk of being seen. Perhaps from nearby I can figure some way to get inside that unfunny fun house. To keep from freezing, I may end up by having to walk right in the front door, though.” He signed off with characteristic abruptness and began a close-quarters inspection of the building.

He left the security of deep shadows in a low crouch, moving fast and taking advantage of every roll of the beach to keep out of the light. No one came out of the Space House, and he seemed to have no company along the windy beach but the abandoned automobile. In a few moments he was down at the water’s edge, hiding in the darkness underneath the pier.

As an alternative to the front entrance he marked the cargo door overlooking one side of the pier. Trucks driving up to it would have to use a ramp to deliver, but Illya suspected some heat-paste or a small bomb might work for him. The door was corrugated steel and looked solidly closed, but U.N.C.L.E. agents in the field usually anticipated doors at least that solid.

He ranged full circle about the pier, angling, in front of the fun house swiftly to be in the light as briefly as possible. He saw no signs of a flaw in their defenses. The exercise had helped him keep warm, but the main entrance still seemed the best way to approach the enemy.

Standing on the hard-packed, wet sand at the beach’s edge he realized more energy had gone into the skulking than it was really worth, even if he had gotten warm. His breath was coming fast, and he let out clouds of white every time he exhaled.

Then his eyes caught the flicker of a burning coal beneath the pier. It seemed to be part of a fire in shadow, and he went rigid, wondering if he had stumbled on some Thrush operation below the Space House, or if he was intruding on someone’s privacy.

Privacy can go hang at a time like this, he thought. My partner may be up there, and if I can take out an outside guard or two it'll help the odds of making a successful rescue. With all the extremes of caution a death-laden career teaches U.N.C.L.E. agents, Illya moved in on the fire and strained to catch sight or sound of anyone lurking nearby.

In the darkness, on his belly in cold sand, he wriggled up to a pier support. Keeping his lean frame entirely behind the piling from the fire, he stood up quietly to peer out.

I feel like Oil-Can Harry, he thought, dashing from post to post, slithering around in the dark and plotting eviyal things to liven up the night as soon as I capture-And then he was next to the fire, staring down into it, seeing that it was covered with sand and deserted. Nobody, he concluded. All this skullduggery, all this deep guerilla warfare methodology, and I end up with a dead fire and no one around to tend it.

The camp had just been abandoned, he decided. Embers still glowed warmly in the heart of it. He scattered sand from the remaining wood, using his paper as a shovel, and then looked at what he was doing.

"I suppose I could warm my backside with this little pint-sized picnic fire," he muttered. "In fact, with the night as rotten freezing unprintable cold as it is, I'm mightily tempted." He conjured up a picture of himself before a roaring blaze, lacking only his slippers. "The crossword has served its purpose and can be converted to kindling-in fact, I don't even need to requisition it, because 1 paid for it, not U.N.C.L.E. But all I need is some other night-crawling type to sneak up on me when he sees the fire. I'd probably be so content lolling in front of it that I'd invite him to clobber me."

Self-discipline had seldom come harder. Nearly shedding a tear, he scooped more dank sand over the wood. "I'm probably doing the Fire Commissioner a big favor, anyway. Maybe they'll give me a Smokey the Bear type hat 'for not letting Coney Island bum down."

He straightened and walked back up to the front of the Space House. Standing just outside the lighted area, he assessed the situation.

With no enemy agents circling the area, he felt sure that Thrush was riding a high wave of overconfidence. Deep inside they had Napoleon, of that he felt certain. Napoleon had just walked into their trap today, seemingly defenseless (because he had intended to be trapped), and they must have thought it a wonderful piece of luck to capture him so easily. Any U.N.C.L.E. agents following ought to have arrived shortly after the car from Gambol's because certainly Thrush couldn't know how U.N.C.L.E.'s tracer device worked.

Their discipline ought to have gone a little slack after a time, thinking they had gotten a free prize.

Illya hitched his trousers up and opened his jacket to ready his pistol. "Napoleon is no prize," he said under his breath, "and I think I'm going to have to go in there and convince them of it."

As he stepped out of the shadows and went directly up to the entrance, he didn't see three figures in denim watching him from the boardwalk. Neither he nor they saw the three Thrushes further back in shadow, who watched everything.

Apprehension dragged Illya's feet as he approached the Space House that Thrush built. The fire below the pier had to be more than just an abandoned picnic, but what did it mean? Complete silence along the cold wintry beach was itself enough to raise his hackles-at other times of the year the place would be wall to wall with sweating hordes from three states, all fighting for a chance to dip a foot in the salt water and get indigestion from hot dogs and soda. The transition to a loneliness of such proportions, with wind moaning inland from the sea, was nightmarish.

He drew his U.N.C.L.E. Special and picked up speed as he stepped onto the piers asphalt. He seemed to float through the open doors, crouching low. Well into the room he discovered he was surrounded by the figures of armed men, who didn't move or breathe.

Outside, three Thrushes pounced on the quarry they'd been watching.

Porpoise spun in his swimming pool like the center of a whirlpool. Color blotched his fat cheeks, and sweat poured over his face, making him submerge again and again to keep cool.

“Those fools have got to find Solo!” he repeated between giving orders and making calls to hasten the arrival of a submarine in Lower Bay. “If he escaped my maze, he had to swim away from it. Nobody can do that in this weather and outguess a search party. He’ll be blue and half dead. They’ve got to find him.”

Apis, hunched over the control console normally in care of Arnold, suddenly activated Porpoise’s television-ceiling to show a man’s shoulders and head. The man calling in struggled to keep from laughing at the sight of Porpoise, alarmingly hairless and fat, floating nude in a swimming pool.

“Code Canary,” said the caller. Porpoise scudded to a halt by reversing his sea-screw, and tilted the violet chair back to look upwards.

“Well, Captain,” he said with a thrum of fingers on his armrest, “how soon can you get here? I know all about your regular schedules. I know all about the three-mile limit. I know the waters, the storms offshore, and I know how high I can reach in the Hierarchy if necessary. How soon can you be here? I may require emergency transportation at any moment.”

Amusement touched the televised face. Many years at sea had marked it with furrows and a few scars, and the result didn’t look like a man who quailed at threats.

“The only factor you didn’t mention is the United States Coast Guard,” he said. “They tend to object to my Canary prowling waters with Uncle Sam’s initials on them; you probably won’t get Thrush Central to order me in as close as Sandy Hook, let alone right into your lap. I’m not too excited about unplanned invasions of New York Harbor anyway, and this trip sounds like a dilly. Fleet HQ hinted you may be evacuating your base under attack by U.N.C.L.E.”

“I am not yet ready to leave, and so far the only sign we have had of U.N.C.L.E. is an investigation, in the city, by one of their Enforcement

Agents. You are needed, Captain. When we captured the U.N.C.L.E. operative and he escaped, the situation ^turned from safe to yellow alert in my mind. If my men fail to run him down before he gets word to his headquarters, you must be prepared to get me out of here."

"Be prepared to stick my neck in the noose with yours, is more like it. The quickest approach would get me there early tomorrow, right under the heaviest shipping lanes; what do you think the harbor police will say to an atomic submarine spinning up to your pier?"

"No need, no need," said Porpoise, shaking his bald head vigorously. "You get close, close enough to catch me if I flit out of here, and I'll take care of the rest. You can be hovering outside the harbor by sunrise, I know. Wait there, and send me a signal. I've got to be covered in case those dolts let him escape. Now, get back to steering, or feeding rocks to your reactor, or whatever you do. I've got a hundred affairs to clean up before I can begin to be ready for U.N.C.L.E."

The Canary's captain turned into a colorful pattern on the screen. The nervousness that Porpoise had tried to conceal during the call took control again, and he sped over to the pool's edge near Apis.

"Get my saucer free and ready," he said, words tumbling over themselves as he manuevered the seachair, wiped away beads of seat, and waved both arms at his tame giant. "And I want my wetsuit, and …" He stopped his gush of words as he looked beyond Apis at the flashing lights on the console. He fell back into the water, and relaxation washed over him.

Apis had anticipated the order in a rare burst of inspiration and had already triggered a series of remote mechanisms into activity from his console. Below the pier, a steel underbelly had cracked outward like the egg of a mammoth bird, revealing the swimming-pool's true bottom and a saucer-shaped ornament hanging from it.

One by one various devices performed their appointed tasks, freeing the vessel from its mooring and placing it lightly on the edges of the metallic eggshell. It rested there, ready for use, while it hummed and responded in the careful check-out procedures Apis controlled. When the consoles ready-

lights flashed, Porpoise had good reason to relax and chuckle up at Apis. He was prepared to flee the amusement pier on any alarm in his two-man submarine, a 1966 French design that would just hold his bulk. It looked like a flying saucer, and no nation's underwater program had developed a swifter search-and-recovery vessel. At depths to 200 feet, the saucer cut through the sea faster than man had ever been able to travel in the ocean. Its master could now cheerfully plan to escape any unwelcome callers.

A smile broke Apis' craggy features as his master burbled for joy in the water. Suddenly the signals from below were interrupted by a slow bell ringing. Apis twisted back to scan the board, and lashed out one long arm to press a button.

Light swam over the ceiling televideo screen again and resolved into the side view of a man's face. Care and cat-alertness furrowed the brow. One hand reached up to push back straight blond hair.

"That's the camera in Hawk Carse's pistol," said Apis, hoping his temperamental boss wouldn't blame him for the intruder.

He needn't have worried. Porpoise leaned back to make himself comfortable, and locked his pudgy fingers together in an embrace of Oriental luxuriousness over his tummy. He smiled with deep warmth at the face on the ceiling. "Now fancy that," he said, more to himself than to Apis. "Long before Napoleon Solo could have alerted U.N.C.L.E., Mr. Illya Kuryakin has followed that wight into our lair. Direct a parabolic mike over here, Apis, and let me speak to our visitor."

A sign in the center of the room told Illya he was in the future's hall of fame, and he straightened up to look around at the shapes nearby. Directly in front of him a figure labeled captain future was aiming a ray-pistol at a Bug Eyed Monster carrying off a frightened bikini-clad girl in a transparent spacesuit. Nearby, a Gemini astronaut posed upside-down in a contortion that was meant to seem like free-fall. Side by side, the "Hall of Fame" paid tribute to Virgil Grissom, Kimball Kinnison, Von Braun and Robbie the Robot.

Illya stepped back warily to scan the rest of the room, and received a rude prod from another figure. He turned and found himself in the middle of a tableau showing the exploration of an alien planet, face to face with a somber individual who frowned right back at him. I bet when Mr. Waverly was younger he looked a lot like that, he thought, examining the serious, analytical set of the statues eyes. That is, if he had pointy ears, green skin and black bangs.

The statue of “Space Hawk” Carse pointed to an exit from the museum with his ray-gun, and Illya paused before him to scout the next room. All looked safe, and he brushed his hair back from his eyes before stepping in.

As he stepped through the opening, a blur of motion beside the door triggered every suspicious reflex in his body. The U.N.C.L.E. Special spat twice as he rolled across the floor, ending in a crouch against the opposite wall. The hulk by the door pulled back, and Illya fired again.

Papier-mache crumpled, and the animated B.E.M. shuddered in a mechanical death-rattle.

“Wonderful!” said Illya. “Now I’ve killed an alien creature, without even knowing what planet it came from. Napoleon, if you aren’t in here somewhere, I’m never going to forgive you.”

Beyond the defunct hulk were more aliens. What might have been overgrown potato bugs or magnified lizards wore labels proclaiming them grulzak, fontema, and space unicorn. Some moved as he tripped electric eyes, others flashed lights at him, and one purred. He was quite happy to leave the Alien Room behind. With a casual “Sorry to shoot and run” directed to the defunct B.E.M., he stepped into the mirrored Space Maze.

“If you stand perfectly still, Mr. Kuryakin, you will be in no danger.”

The Russian skipped quickly behind a partition, looking for the speaker, and twisted angrily when he realized he’d been duped. His first step had been enough to take him wholly into the maze, and as he turned again a steel door snapped across the opening.

“Tut, tut,” said the voice, so finely projected that Illya had trouble believing the words weren’t being spoken next to him. “Now you’ve done it. Before you move again, you should know that the mirror directly to your left will explode on slightest contact.”

Illya glanced left, to see his reflection glancing right. A hundred fine lines cut eerily across his image. A hundred fine wires embedded in the glass, each carrying enough energy to hurl glass splinters completely through him. He now had reason enough for believing the voice.

“Now then. We have established that you cannot go backwards, and you can only progress through the maze by careful attention to directions. For instance, step carefully on the runner strip dividing the rooms before you go forward, or you will be cut down by a crisscross of laser beams. Be sure to step into each new room exactly when I tell you to. I’m turning off such traps as I control before you, and I’m turning them on again directly.

Step by step Illya followed his unseen guide through the maze. It was a bit testy, tiptoe edging through the glass Space-Warp Room, and jumping across a trapdoor advertised to drop him into the 356th Chorp Dimension-or perhaps into the ocean. In a chamber of see-through futuristic machines his left-ring finger accidentally brushed a Cosmic Energy Spacedrive. The Spacedrive was wired for energy considerably beyond house current, and the shock threw him violently against a wall. Gas spewed out, doubling him up in a coughing spasm.

“You have been distressingly clumsy,” said the voice, “but perhaps we can save you from your own mistakes. Keep low, and walk straight ahead quickly.” With minute care to each step Illya followed directions, finally emerging into a safe room, wiping tears from his eyes. The coughing stayed with him, but fans started working near the Spacedrive exhibit, and the gas was dispersed.

“Mr. Kuryakin, you must be more careful. You must not touch anything you aren’t explicitly ordered to touch. If you are recovered, please step along the curved walkway before you.”

Beneath his feet ran the rings of Saturn, sprinkled generously with shards of mirror, an illusion created on glass flooring by projection from below. Meteorites sped by silently, and the walls were darkened to give the illusion of limitless space. The maze was tricky enough in the summertime without the death-laden pitfalls, but in the off-season for tourists it was sweaty palms all the way.

While balancing on the “rings” and trying to keep from touching the walls or tripping over the broken mirror, Illya covertly reached into his jacket and turned on his U.N.C.L.E. communicator. He raised his voice well above conversational level, hoping the Thrush monitoring him would assume the maze was upsetting him.

“Is this right?” he half-shouted. “It’s dark in here. Am I on the open channel?” With any luck, the U.N.C.L.E. switchboard would recognize a distress call and relay him through Enforcement without answering.

“Take the communicator out of your pocket,” said the voice from above. “Hold it up so I can see it plainly.”

He sighed, stopped walking in the darkness and held out his communicator. He must have been seen turning it on, even in the pitch-black of outer space.

“We can’t let you call for help, I’m afraid. That is a compact little instrument, however; I congratulate your technicians.” With that, a beam burned out from a wall and the fountain-pen communicator became scorchingly hot. It clattered to the floor as Illya’s burned fingers recoiled. “If you’d been holding it just a bit differently, I’d have had to drive the beam through your hand. It’s just a touch more complicated destroying those things than it is building them.”

At the end of the Saturn promenade were more small rooms requiring quick and careful movements. A run across one room and a flat jump across the next brought Illya face to face with a steel door.

“No, Mr. Kuryakin, you are not walking in a circle. This is the other end of the maze.” The door slid open, and he found himself in the small Space

Ship Room that Napoleon had so recently exited. ‘Tour friend Mr. Solo didn’t like our company, but I’m certain we can persuade you to spend a little more time with us. There is so much we have to discuss.”

Illya fingered the bottom button of his jacket. Detached, it became a small concussion grenade. Now just open one more door, he thought, stepping toward the spacelock that led to Thrush’s inner sanctum. Aloud, he said, “I’m looking forward to meeting you, but I really can’t stay, especially if Napoleon has already decided to leave. He’s my advance scout, you know. If he turns thumbs down on your accommodations, I’m sure there’s nothing more to be said.”

“The decision is not yours,” said the voice from beyond the door. A swishing sound behind warned him an instant too late. Blackness descended as a Thrush blackjack caught him neatly behind the ear.

Section IV : “By the beautiful sea.”

Chapter 9

“Anybody who swings can’t be all bad.”

Only anger kept Napoleon alive. The wet cold closed over his head and there was nothing underneath but more wet, more cold. In the total body cramp that grabbed him and pulled him under, anger turned into a ball of fire that started in his skull, at the back, and worked into bright, strong fury coursing down his spine.

I just did the impossible, he thought, forcing his hands to uncurl and stretch out. I got here through a hell that would give Dante bad dreams, and I’m not going to be cheated of it by drowning! He forced one, then both legs straight. The cramp pain from the bottoms of his feet shot through his thighs, into his bowels and turned the world black again. No! No! No! he thought angrily. Somehow he made both legs kick, and his head broke surface. Somehow he brought air into his lungs and put back together the pieces of Napoleon Solo.

He floated until he could move both arms and both legs, ignoring the pain. He wanted to cry, and lick his hands, and the blazing touch of salt and cold shot through him down to the navel roots. Flushed, he floated until he realized that the choppy sea was carrying him back into the pilings.

Sanity and some strength returned. Through force of will he held himself still in the near freezing waters, letting the cold numb out his lacerations. Paddling, still on his back, he prayed once more to the patron saint of spies, to keep him in the dark, and safe from Thrush eyes. More strength returned, and he attempted a single side stroke with some success.

Two choices, he thought. Straight in under the pier and trust to luck, or swim down the beach and trust to … Straight in it is, then. The strength for swimming came from some unknown energy source designed for the men

who live for danger, and he knew he had to make it in, near the barnacle-covered pilings, because the other path was wide open under starlight.

After all, he thought, Coney Island is hardly the most exotic place in the world to buy mine. In a job like this I could get killed in any of the most glamorous resorts in the world. Nearly have, in point of fact, in most of them. I think Td rather get it at Cannes or Trieste.

In his imagination, warm summers on the Mediterranean came back, and the arm-over-arm picked up from a feeble effort to become a rhythm. Memories pushed away the dismal Coney beach, and he was swimming up to another beach far away, an esoteric little strip of sand he knew in Europe, far away from hot-dog crazy crowds, where he had thought he could forget about secrets and death for a while. Adrenalin pumped through him, and a sudden mouthful of briny Atlantic reminded him that even that swim had only been half an eyeblink between fights for his life. He stroked, and began to feel fully in control of himself again, back in harness even with his pants wrapped around one arm.

A small roller wave carried him full-tilt up onto the sand, and all at once the enchantment of his swim was gone. Far from a fight and farther from the Mediterranean summer, he lay on the beach in sodden flannel clothes, mouth crammed with salt and grit, and the cold night air hit him like a shot point blank from a magnum rifle. The water in his clothes and on his body weighed like ten men the size of Avery Porpoise, and the winter freeze settled into his shoes and socks. He always wondered after that evening how that much pain, cold and exhaustion could be overcome; but overcome it he did, slowly heaving to hands and knees, and then to a cautious crouch, hopping further away from the tide.

He stopped spitting out sand when he saw a lean figure silhouetted against the ferris wheel skyline of the amusement centers. Solo went into action, every muscle rejoicing that he was back on dry land and mixing with a human foe instead of the inscrutable Atlantic.

Keeping low, he ran quickly up the beach intending to tackle whoever was standing guard by Thrush s pier, and ask some pointed questions with one knee in the fellow’s stomach. It had to be quick, bare hands against

whatever weapons the sentry had. Despite the drag of his wet shoes he was moving at top speed when he left the ground in a flying tackle. The weight of him and the extra weight of tons of cold water leaped hard, aimed to hit dead amidships.

Not more than a heartbeat separated him from his target when he was blasted out of the sky by a second dark figure, thrown to the ground and pinned.

“Curse you, Red Baron,” he wheezed, trying to breathe around the knee dug firmly into his stomach. “What kind of welcome is this for a poor immigrant just off the ship, anyway?”

Dimly, Napoleon could see that he was held down by two young men dressed entirely in dark denim. But they didn’t wear the little berets that marked Thrush, and objects about them rattled in musical beats when they moved. The one standing asked him, “Just off the boat, why’d you come on like White Fang? All I need this evening is some joker trying to jump for my throat on the beach.”

“Well—” said Napoleon. But the youngster kneeling on him interrupted and pressed harder on his stomach.

“Not well, man, not well at all. Here we are innocently promenading the strand, when we see you doing Lloyd Bridges in the dark. Charlie stops to watch and I lay down. No provocation whatsoever-were just digging. Yet all of a sudden you try to jump Charlie. What kind of a game, that’s all we want to know.”

“And what are you doing out swimming on a night like this? You think he’s some kind of health nut, Andy?”

“No,” answered the kneeler, “the health nuts wear union suits or nothing at all. This one is dressed like a very dippy banker or something, complete with shoes.”

“Yeah, shoes. You should hear yourself tippy-toeing up on somebody in soggy shoes. Wow.”

“But—” said Napoleon.

“And breathing,” said Andy, shaking his head mournfully over Napoleon in the dark. “You may just not work out enough, friend, but your wind stinks. You ought to work out more; run some.”

“Sand you got; wind no.” Both of them looked down at him and waited to hear what he had to say.

Napoleon thought wryly of the chase he’d given three Thrushes just a few hours ago, but he couldn’t get breath enough for boasting. The youth holding him down, Andy, couldn’t weigh over 140, but that sat on him like a dozen anvils after the night’s workout. Until that knee raised up, he was likely to remain a fixture on the coast of Kings County.

“You men,” he gasped, “don’t want me to catch my death of cold.” At that, he felt the salt water in this throat was giving more than a touch of diseased hoarseness to his voice. “Why don’t we talk this over? I assure you there was every reason for me to be wary of anyone I saw.”

With no more than a nod between them, Charlie and Andy had Napoleon on his feet, with both arms whipped up behind him and both hands bent uncomfortably in a good imitation of a police come-along. If he pulled away, one or both wrists would probably snap with some small attendant pain. He decided his body had suffered enough tonight, and he could content himself with dragging in great volumes of air to fill his aching lungs. Let them lead on, since obviously they had no connection with Thrush. Even a pair of rough-and-tumble experts were better company than Porpoise and his crew of funhouse crazy thugs.

He stumbled almost unnoticeably as they prodded him, firmly held, across the beach. His breathing and pulse slowed down, and the stumbling vanished. All his control was coming back to maximum, despite the cold and his weakness.

He almost sacrificed a broken wrist in the heart-stopping moment when their goal seemed to be the Thrush amusement pier. But before he fully

tensed to spring free, a flicker of fire showed beneath the pier's base, and he realized his beach-bum friends were heading for a camp directly underneath Porpoise's hideout.

"Lovely place for a beach fire," he said idly. "Aren't you afraid you'll bum down the pier?"

"No use for the pier," replied Andy, amid clankings from his clothes that continued to arouse Napoleon's curiosity. "The old matzoh-brain who owns it gets no time of day from us. We burn him down, he'll just build another one."

"We just hang around, and sneak into the funhouse sometimes. Summers, the barker can't keep track who goes in, so we spend more time in than out. If we break something, or if we need to borrow the day's receipts, he breaks out in green splotches, but he never yells for the fuzz." Charlie shifted his grip on Napoleon for security as they got under the pier, and continued. "There's a live-in herd of muscle up there, they come on like a riot squad when we make enough trouble. So don't talk too loud—you wouldn't like them either."

A girl's voice cut in on them: "Hey, a visitor!" They stopped just before the fire, and Napoleon saw the girl, sitting across the flames from him, red and yellow light picking out fair skin, coal-black hair, and a garland of flowers on her head from ear around to ear. "What have you got there, Andy? Put him down so we can talk."

His arms free, Napoleon moved as close to the fire as he could. He brushed himself off, making each motion do double duty, cleaning the sand from him and warming his numbed body. The bleeding had stopped during his swim, but both hands were still embedded with splinters and sand, and as he chafed them warm again he realized how much damage had been done.

A covert glance at the young lady's grin reminded him that he was still wearing his trousers wrapped around one arm. She watched him straighten them out and force his feet down each leg. She watched him button them,

and curse when the zipper fouled in soft cloth. She sat grinning through his whole performance, until he finally shook all over once, and stood up.

“Your boxer shorts are flower-patterned,” she said.

“My boxer shorts regret being flower-patterned,” said Napoleon in his best Old World courtly manner. “They were not consulted before being brought here.”

“Hey, I wasn’t complaining. I think you’ve got the grooviest underpants this side of the East River.” She reached up with both hands and pushed her hair back over her shoulders, and he watched. He was pleased with her broad forehead and narrow chin, but he wished he was sure what the happy smile meant. s

“You know, you beat all,” she said. “If that’s the costume for this winter’s surfers, we’ll just have to close the beach to keep me from going into hysterics.” She rested her head on one fist, elbow on knee, and both her eyes sparkled with laughter. Napoleon looked down at himself, and at them. They were all in the same somber levis, the remains of denim jackets, and flowers. But they looked ready for high society compared to him.

The moebius twisting he’d had to use to escape from Porpoise had ripped his pants legs, and salt water had ruined the rest of a new flannel suit. His shoes looked like chewed cardboard, and it was anybody’s guess what his hair was like.

“Well,” he said, “the party got sort of rough on my yacht. People drinking and getting sort of physical, you know. When the whole thing got into one big hot pile of bodies, I must have had too much and just jumped overboard.”

“Sure,” said Charlie calmly. “You swam ashore from a boat we didn’t see, or else it’s running sadly amiss in the legal lights department. You must have come in from outside the three-mile limit for us not to see it.” He picked his teeth with a daisy stem, and moved his eyes up and down Napoleon. “Try again. Only this time let’s start with a jump off the pier. I

think we'll buy a try at suicide, if you throw in the reason your clothes are all slashed."

Napoleon looked at the girl, who'd stopped laughing at him. "You won't buy suicide, will you?"

"Nope. Look at him, you two. He's trying to figure some way away from here right now, and every time we mention the pier, he flinches. Looks to me like he's got trouble with the boys upstairs."

Napoleon looked around at two boys in their early twenties, and a girl who might have been eighteen, but no more. "I'm not off a boat, and I didn't attempt suicide," he said, "but I did come from the pier. If they grab me again, they probably won't let me go in nearly this good a condition. I need to get as far from here as possible, preferably back to the city. I need clothes, food and first aid, and they're all back in Manhattan for me."

She stood up and walked around the fire, which allowed him to turn and warm his backside. With his teeth no longer chattering, he could concentrate on the strange pretty girl, with her dark hair hanging free, decked with flowers, tiny bells and clay jewelry, before an open fire on the sand. Night winds moved under the pier to push hair from her face and make tinglings among her bells, building a picture of witchery that made him shiver.

"We'll take you," she said.

"You off your nut?" said Andy. "If the hired apes upstairs catch us with him, we'll all take a real bad trip!

"Besides," said Charlie, "who wants to leave the fire? We've been out on the beach since sundown, and it's anything but summer. Come off it, Mal-let him go, but don't mix us in."

She laughed, and looked right at Napoleon. Her foot kicked twice, and the fire was nearly smothered with heavy sand. "There's no action out there yet, or you ought to have seen it. When they decide to go looking for him, they'll charge out yelling and flashing lights, like when we steal something.

You know there isn’t one brain to share around for all of them, except Arnold, and he usually has to stay back to hold Fatty’s hand. Anytime I can’t take a herd of camels through one of their search parties, I’ll throw away my retrievable subway token.” She stopped in the night to chuckle right in Napoleon’s face.

“Besides, he’s got flowers on his shorts, so he’s cool. He doesn’t look like much all cut up and half-drowned, but he comes on right; he doesn’t give an inch. Anybody who swings can’t be all bad.”

And like that, the four of them were heading across the sand, with Napoleon dose to the girl, flanked by her mascots.

Keeping his voice down, he asked her, “What’s Mal short for?”

“It’s kind of Greek,” she said. “My full name is Phroso Popia Boulis, but that was good for when I lived at home. Not now.” With one hand she indicated the direction of Brooklyn and brushed her hair back over one shoulder in a single wide sweep, continuing to drive a long, fast pace over the sand. “I was raised near 50th Street, good Greek Orthodox family. When things started seeming a little silly, I split. And if you don’t get married or hit college at that age, you end up a part of some gang. For a couple months I worked in a store, and ran with a bunch of ragged-ass kids, mostly Greek and Puerto Rican.” As they hurdled the boardwalk at a low point it occurred to Napoleon that this was a long explanation for such a short name. He hadn’t time to say anything to her, though, because as all four of them came up onto the boardwalk two Thrushes appeared from shadows and the furtive beach ramble turned into a free-for-all.

Napoleon ran head-on into one of the hoodlums and caught a blackjack across his forearm before he could put his left hand into the man’s solar plexus. Turning, he found Andy sitting piggy-back on the other one, with Charlie doing a land of half-twist to put his bare heel into the Thrush’s groin.

“Hurry!” whispered Mal. “There’s more of them along the walk!” She stopped to hit each of the unconscious Thrushes quickly behind the ear, and then noises from both sides made them hurry off through Coney.

“The bugger tried to bite me,” muttered Andy, while they did four statue imitations in shadow. Mal shushed him.

When two more Thrush agents came together over the unconscious pair, took counsel and split up into the darkness between buildings, Mal took her brood out again. They loped along for four blocks, springing across lighted area, and finally the urgency quieted down. “I think they’re looking for us to be quivering in a comer back there near the bodies,” said Mal. “If we loop over now and head for the coffee-house area, we won’t cover any place they’ll be looking.” At a quick walk, she led Napoleon while Andy took point and Charlie covered the rear.

“So the P.R.s never bothered me, but the other Greek kids did. They figured they were big men, and kept after me one way and another. I finally learned to stop saying no, because when I just stood and said, “Oh, yes, indeed” they got all hot and bothered, and got close enough for me to half murder ‘em.” She smiled wickedly through her hair at him. “I got to be sort of famous at dirty fighting in my own gang,” she beamed, “and got named for it. Mal is short for ‘Malista’ my nickname. It means “Yes, indeed” in Greek.”

Napoleon smiled in the night. When the two from Thrush jumped out at them, he hadn’t seen Mal raise a finger. The boys had let him do his share, and they’d taken care of the other one with vicious teamwork. Yet he had a feeling both Thrushes wouldn’t have stood a chance against this snip of a girl.

For a while, as they got further from the beach toward brighter street lights, they hurried and Napoleon decided not to say anything when he could use the energy to keep up with his trio of guards. Charlie and Andy kept an alert lookout for more black-clad men or for the more dangerous street-wanderers who might call up a local gang. They waited in a space between buildings near an open nightclub, and while they watched for cabs he wondered how rugged life might be in a Brooklyn tenement. If a clear-eyed pretty girl like Mal chose a gang for a second family, things must have gotten way past ten-to-a-room at home.

“Now you live out?” he asked her. “No place in out of the snow?”

“Not much snow yet this year,” she said, “and when it comes we’ll do just like last year. Sleep on subways, in johns, in that funhouse you bust out of, or more likely in somebody’s pad, when we figure a way to click with vacations. Lot of people live here half a year, trundle off to Florida all winter.”

“Not likely this year,” said Andy, wishing he were back by their fire. “Lot of blowy weather coming up that tore a piece off Florida last week. Any day we’ll get a whole beach full of rain.”

“Charlie and Andy don’t like rain. It was raining the night they tried to mug me, last November in Gravesend.”

“Mug schmug,” said Andy. “The subject is sore in need of a change.”

“They braced me near a park, and walked me into it.

I was just going to see how well I could handle the two of them, when something happened.”

“Something happened,” said Andy.

“She shoulda murdered us,” said Charlie.

“I was just back from a love-in. I went to dig the hippies, and I spent all day trying to figure what made’ them tick. Big bruisers with motorcycle boots and chains, little geeks with glasses, and kids like me. All running around with silly grins, handing each other flowers. Before I got out of there. I was all over flowers from guys and girls who kept talking about agape.”

“Agape,” said Charlie. “She shoulda murdered us.” Both boys kept looking right and left, trying to ignore the talk while they looked for cabs.

“It’s Greek,” said Andy, answering Napoleon’s unasked > question. “It means love. No hot pants, just love, with flowers and kissing each other on the eyes.”

Napoleon held the word in his mouth, and looked at the two boys, who shifted their gaze away. Three syllables, a-gah-pay, and these two rangy, muscled would-be hoods would rather be beaten. Charlie pushed at his sun-bleached straight hair, and said, “We made nice with her, and planned no bruises or cuts, no stealing, just a little sharing the wealth. What could be simpler?”

“And I got ready to break anything they let me get hold of,” she said in a flat voice, with her eyes shining out bright, “when suddenly the light turned on. I knew what the hippies were after, and I had it.”

Andy scuffed his bare foot against cement. “She took me by the shoulders and said, ‘I love you,’ and kissed my eyes.” He spat in the street.

Charlie turned and lit a cigarette, muttering about preferring to be murdered.

Then a taxi came, and Malista had time for just one more thing. “I adopted them,” she said through the car window, “and there’s lots more room on the beach. Get yourself some clothes and a bouquet, and I’ll adopt you, too.” She leaned in, kissed him on both eyes, and then all three kids were lost in the night.

“What was that?” asked the cabbie.

“I was a guest of honor,” said Napoleon. “Ah—at a fraternity party. That was the send-off committee. How soon can we get to Manhattan?” He leaned back in the worn seat, thankful for the cab’s heater, and mumbled short answers to the driver’s stream of helpful conversation about college rowdies, race problems and cops, until warmth and exhaustion pulled sleep down around him like a falling cloud.

As Mal and her pair of foster-children moved through the city back to her beach, they kept on the bounce, watching for roving groups of men in black, knowing that it would be as hard to get back through Thrush as it had been to get out. But, moving quickly, they went right past the Thrush named Arnold, who saw them coming and stepped into hiding.

“You’re outa your gourd,” said Andy softly as they passed Arnold, “picking up a guy out of the wet and risking all our necks to get him away.” Arnold’s ears perked up, and he decided he didn’t need to hear any more. Rather than follow, he turned aside and found two of his men patrolling another street.

“Solo has gotten away,” he said, and told them what he’d heard the boy say. “They must have gotten him safely off somehow, or he’d still be with them. You know those three; let’s catch up on them, and find out what we can about their connection with U.N.C.L.E.”

The Thrushes found their quarry at the beach, crouching on the boardwalk and whispering to each other. Across the strip of sand a figure moved toward the fun house, and Charlie spoke.

“It isn’t one of them; you can see he’s wearing a sweater or something light-colored, and they’re always in black. Besides, the way he came up from our fire and is looking around, you can see he doesn’t belong here. What say he’s a friend of Napoleon’s?”

“If he is,” answered Mal worriedly, “we’ve got to tell him he’s in the middle of a search party from the pier. They might not object to picking up two for the price of one, even if they don’t know Napoleon got away.”

They stood upright and began to clamber over the railing, when suddenly Arnold and his men sprang. There was no warning this time, and all three kids were smothered in strong grips. Mal twisted, pummeling Arnold, using every trick she knew to get free. But with an almost equal balance of dirty in-fighting ability, age and weight told. In a trice, each Thrush was sitting on one flower-child, handkerchiefs smothering their yells, while all six watched the amusement pier and Porpoise’s men chuckled.

Illya Kuryakin, unaware of his audience, decided once more on a direct assault and walked boldly through the fun house’s main entrance. The beach wind died behind him as he stepped into the lighted foyer of ‘The

Future’s Hall of Fame,” wondering how far he could get invading a house of glass, lights and mirrors.

Behind him, Arnold and his men picked up their prisoners and began the long trek to the Space House. Mal, Charlie and Andy refused to go quietly, and couldn’t be held still enough to be sapped safely. Three grown men found it harder work than they wished, dragging three struggling youngsters across the beach toward an unattractive interview with Porpoise.

Chapter 10

“I’m not Sanforized!”

A throbbing pain in the back of his head brought Illya awake and forced his eyes open. In one sour moment of sight he took in a ghastly picture. Water filled his nose and mouth, and his choking reaction closed his eyes tight.

Mentally he played back the vision of a violet chair, upside down, encasing the nude underparts of a ridiculously fat man. Two legs, plump and wiggling, attached to a bloated trunk by thighs as disgustingly soft white as they were huge. Coughing and spitting, he finally managed to clear the water from his nose, only to breathe in another mouthful, half air, half water.

I seem to be underwater; he thought, as reflex emptied his mouth again. He bucked and struggled to bring his head up into the air. His feet seemed to be locked in some sort of vise, and his hands, as usual under this type of circumstance, were tied at his back. Some unknown agency raised him into the air, coughing and spewing water as he came. His first pure breath met a lusty belch coming in the other direction, and he almost strangled again.

He tilted his head forward and opened his eyes. He was being held like a prize fish, his ankles gripped by the biggest man he’d ever seen. In a back-wrenching half twist, Illya looked from pool deck to ceiling, following upwards the frame of the Thrush named Apis. Before he could fully assimilate that worthy’s size, he was swung back head down, and brought face to upside-down face with the top portion of his underwater hallucination.

“Good evening, Mr. Kuryakin,” said the hallucination, and Illya instantly recognized the voice as that of his guide through the death maze.

He opened his mouth to reply, and Apis lowered him swiftly into the water. Illya choked and strangled on another mouthful of warm chlorinated water.

“Hey!” he yelled, spouting water like an Italian fountain, “don’t do that without warning me!”

“Mr. Kuryakin, you will please conduct your share of our little dialogue with a bit more control. I abhor noise, and if you do not lower your voice, Apis will. About two feet and for about ten minutes. Do we understand one another?”

“Excuse me. I don’t seem to be completely in control of my etiquette when the blood is pounding down into my head like this. I wouldn’t want to cause you any discomfort, not when you’ve gone to so much trouble to make me feel at home here.”

Porpoise raised one finger, and Illya sucked in sufficient air to hold him for another brief dunking. Apis held him under until the blobbish underparts of Porpoise started to waver before his eyes. Coughing and spitting seemed to be the signal the giant was waiting for, so Illya exhaled underwater and prayed that he had guessed right. Apis brought him up for another mouthful of air, and then gave him another short bath, just to let him know who was boss.

“Too loud, still?” he asked in a much subdued voice.

“Excellent, Mr. Kuryakin. Now let us get one thing straight. I have all the information I want or need about U.N.C.L.E. from Solo, except for some small details. Those details are only a nuisance; you can enlighten me, and live, or you can refuse, and drown. I’d be slightly disappointed if you chose the latter, but let me assure you you are of no value to me, dead or alive. If you guide your answers to my questions with this in mind, I’m sure we will get along famously.”

Illya managed to smile through the water running down his face, and answered softly, “I’d love to help, really I would, but I’m more an idea man. Napoleon handles all the details.” The speech was finished underwater, and Illya immediately began to buck and kick as if he were

drowning again. Apis pulled him to the surface before he even really began to feel uncomfortable. He sprayed out the mouthful of water he'd been saving, and was pleased to see Porpoise back off out of range.

"Once more, Apis; I feel Mr. Kuryakin is not yet convinced." After a repeated series of dunkings, Illya was beginning to doubt that he was going to live long enough to refuse to answer anything.

"Hey, I'm not Sanforized!" he gargled next change he got, and immediately regretted it as Apis started to dunk him again.

"Let's stop this foolishness, shall we? I'll ask a question or two, and you will answer, and then we can both be about our business." Porpoise sounded slightly hurt that

Illya wasn't cooperating. Illya was too busy breathing to answer, so Porpoise went on.

"Now, how did U.N.C.L.E. get Napoleon Solo out of here?"

Illya opened his eyes in amazement. "Out of here?" Before he could say aught else he was in the pool again, and then hauled roughly up, gasping. He shook his head, trying to clear the water from his eyes and nose, but it didn't help, for just as he was about to speak again, Apis dunked him.

"This is ridiculous," he finally managed to gasp. "Even if I could answer you, your tame derrick here wouldn't let me. How about if I sit in the chair and he dangles you for a while? I don't know what happened to Napoleon. I just followed him in here, and you clobbered me. What am I supposed to know?"

"That won't do, Mr. Kuryakin. That won't do at all. We destroyed Solo's tracer device, and searched him thoroughly for another. We took a variety of no doubt useful devices from his person, just as we have from yours. We shut him up in the very maze you so recently walked through with my help, and he managed to escape. Now you will tell me how!" Porpoise raised his voice to a squeak on the last sentence, and Apis took

that as a command to plunge Illya into the pool almost to the ankles, head foremost.

Illya digested the information about Napoleon, wishing fervently that there had been just a whit more coordination on this project. Finally he could hold his breath no longer and was forced to exhale. Apis snatched him from the depths and snapped him once, clearing the water from his throat, and nearly popping the eyes out of his head. Illya managed a strangled breath before his next dip.

“Do you have the answers I desire, Mr. Kuryakin? Or shall I let Apis continue his little game?” Porpoise had once more regained full control of himself, and Illya was losing his own swiftly.

“I suppose I must tell you. Napoleon traveled through the far east as a young man. While there he saved the life of an ancient Guru, who among other things taught him full mental control of his surroundings.” The completely incredulous look on Porpoises face so confused Apis that he allowed Illya to continue uninterrupted. “When Napoleon returned to this country he had the power to cloud men’s minds, and so I suspect he didn’t actually escape your maze. He’s probably—”

The rest of Illya’s answer was interrupted by more water. Porpoise had finally reacted sufficiently to give Apis the proper cue. Illya, caught short of breath, kicked and bucked while small pinwheels went off behind his eyes. The trouble with Porpoise was definitely linked to an atrophied sense of humor. Finally, bending at the middle into an upright position, he managed to get enough air to keep alive. He spat a mouthful of water straight into Apis’s eyes, and miraculously was dragged completely free of the water while the giant regained his sight. Illya took a deep breath and was plunged back under the surface; he was learning how to breathe safely, even with a mouthful of chlorine. Despite the growing discomfort, he was far from drowned when Porpoise signaled for a stop to the dunking.

“You are probably trying to wait until Apis tires, so you can use a change of hands to kick away free.” The fat man smiled broadly up at the giant. “I trust you are. willing to wait quite a while. You see, Apis just doesn’t tire.” There followed a rapid succession of immersions, which

proved that Apis could move the Russian's weight around with no more trouble than Illya would have had turning the pages of a book. Illya would have congratulated him on the workmanlike display of strength, had he had the breath. Water and air seemed to run together, and it hardly mattered which he breathed. By the time his seesaw ground to a temporary halt, half the swimming pool was in his lungs and stomach, his eyes were ready to burst with the continued strain of holding his breath when there was no breath, and he'd built up a violent, grinding cough.

"Now if you please," said his host, "can we get down to business? You U.N.C.L.E. people all seem to take us of Thrush for dunces. I assure you that I am not a dunce, and that if you once more play the fool with me, Apis will continue dunking you until your head turns soft. Have I made myself clear?" The he managed to escape to float before his eyes like a rubber vall, and despite his half drowned condition, Illya wanted to laugh.

"We will table the question of Solo's escape for the moment. You might know no more about it than I do, but you did not just follow Mr. Solo in here on speculation, not with this newspaper in your coat pocket."

The first part of the tirade had gone into Illya's ears through a great deal of water, and the playful Apis had punctuated his chiefs main points with more dips, so Illya wasn't quite sure if he had been asked another question or not. He opened his mouth to ask, when his eyes finally cleared and he recognized the newspaper waving back and forth over the floating mound of humanity. Illya closed his mouth with a snap, remembering the fire below the pier, and wishing he had succumbed to the temptation of warming himself over it. The paper, open to the crossword puzzle, was probably going to cost him his life.

"Hey," he managed at last, "that's my crossword puzzle. I haven't finished it yet. Don't get it all soggy, or I'll never get 'The longest word' in six letters."

"You simple idiot, you don't expect me to believe that you have half worked my puzzle, have circled my name, and to put the tin cap on it, have underlined the chief clues all by accident?" Porpoise bobbed before the Russian like a pink cork, getting more and more agitated as he spoke.

“Between you and Solo I have learned enough to tell me that U.N.C.L.E. knows a lot and still very little. You can’t hope to stop my operation, even if you should manage to capture me. If you don’t show a bit more sense than you have shown to date, I feel we can dispense with you entirely.”

“I didn’t come here to be insulted,” Illya answered with a straight face. “What’s this about half working your puzzle? -that’s my puzzle, paid for with my dime. I’ll mark it up any way I see fit, if I get enough of it back to mark on.” He was trying to convince Porpoise that, despite all evidence to the contrary, his possession of the puzzle was quite innocent. With a less vain man it would have been a ludicrous attempt, but Porpoise snapped at the bait.

“I am sure you spent your good money for this copy of my puzzle, Mr. Kuryaldn,” Porpoise explained as if to a child. “I am Avery D. Porpoise. I constructed this puzzle for my own purposes, as I am quite sure you know.” Despite his words, his tone and expression belied him. Porpoise wanted to believe that his communications system was too clever to be discovered, and Illya was perfectly willing to let him convince himself that it was so.

“You are Avery D. Porpoise?” Apis, suddenly aware that Illya was drying out, managed to drown out the last few syllables. Porpoise signaled him to let Illya continue, and the Russian came up spluttering, “You write the most fiendishly difficult puzzles in the world. There have been times when I have tom my hair trying to get past one of your strange definitions.”

“Oh, bother the compliments,” said Porpoise, obviously pleased. “You didn’t come here to talk puzzles. Solo’s try to crack one of our brokers in Manhattan and your own follow-up moves are obviously too hostile to me and my project to make me believe that U.N.C.L.E. is unaware of my puzzle.” Porpoise was almost pleading to be reassured.

“What do you mean? What sort of weapon is a crossword puzzle? Outside of causing U.N.C.L.E. to lose maybe a hundred or so man hours daily while we try to solve them, I don’t see that your puzzles can be much of a threat to us at all.” Illya was pulling out all stops, and Porpoise was beginning to doubt the evidence of his own eyes. The Russian completed the ruse by asking in his most innocent tone, “What is the secret of your

puzzle? I’m not likely to tell anyone from here, and you’ve certainly got me curious enough to ask.”

Porpoise waved him silent, and Apis took the opportunity to get in some really versatile dunking and dipping. When Illya finally came to a rest once more, the cough he was developing had to compete with a violent set of the hiccups. What little air he managed to drag into his sodden lungs was either sprayed or strangled out of him, and Porpoise was starting off on a whole new subject for discussion.

“You must be aware of U.N.C.L.E.‘s plan to get me out of here. I want you to tell me what sort of plan you

have in mind, when you plan to spring it, and how I can evade capture. If we get all these points settled, I will instruct Apis to give you a rest, a dry rest.”

“The plan is simple,” Illya choked and coughed, interspersing the words with loud hiss. “I was to come in here and tell funny stories, get you laughing, then when you were helpless I was to roll you out-”

Apis outdid himself in a frenzy of dunking. Illya tried to hold his breath, but the cough and the hiccups wouldn’t let up even though he was underwater. Finally the lights behind his eyes went out, and the bucking body went limp.

Illya was unconscious, lying on the pool deck with Apis bent over him injecting a few minutes’ controlled sleep, when Arnold and his two henchmen entered, dragging three angry flower-children.

“Arnold,” said Porpoise with undisguised annoyance, “why are you bringing those three in here again? I thought we agreed to ignore their pranks until they caused us some real trouble, and then to just shoot them out of hand. Why must you continue to annoy me with them?”

“This was no prank,” said little Arnold, holding Malista with both hands and avoiding her frantic kicks at his shins. “It was one thing for them to pose as rotten kids, breaking and stealing. It’s another entirely for them to

be U.N.C.L.E. agents, helping Solo and your friend here." All eyes turned to Illya as he hiccuped violently, but the spasm was over before Apis could move, and sleep took over again.

"I found them out on the beach, trying to flank our search party, talking about how they just helped Solo into a taxi. They probably also helped Kuryakin slip past the searchers, and for all we know they helped Solo escape my maze."

"You couldn't build anything Napoleon couldn't escape!" said Mal, twisting to try and get Arnold with her teeth. He already had reddening tooth-marks on his nose, and drew back quickly enough to show he didn't want a repeat.

"We didn't help anybody out of anything," said Andy belligerently, still trying to break the armlock holding him. "We found this cat out in the water, and dried him off. We got him past your fumble-foots and into a taxi. So what are you gonna do about it?"

The discussion promised to be a lively one, but the small chime in the wall sounded its gentle note, bringing all debate to a close. Porpoise levered himself into an erect sitting position in his chair. "You will all be much quieter. Arnold, hand over your prisoners to Apis, and then be about your tasks. Apis, you will lock our four guests in the Spaceship Room, and make sure that all of the devices are live. Don't bother them with the usual warnings; if they want to go through the maze I'm sure that none of them will be missed. You two aid Apis." The flurry of orders finished, the rotund villain set his floating chair into motion.

Apis scooped Illya up in one hand, and lifted the kicking Malista up by the back of her jeans. Illya hiccuped again, dribbling water, and for a moment all was deathly quiet in the room. Mal looked from Andy to Chuck, and then swung around to look at Porpoise. "It must be twenty of or twenty after!" For no reason in the world this took all three of them into a fit of laughter, and the combination of a meaningless joke and Porpoise's aversion to noise raised their voices to a roar. Apis and his men quickly ushered them out, and Porpoise jiggled his way across the room to the hidden entrance to the radio room.

Coincident with the sounding of the chime, an electric wristwatch set off a small alarm on the wrist of a tall, lean blond individual. He glanced at the watch, reset the alarm, and reached into a pocket for a small gold case. Four men watched as he opened the case, shook it gently, and then snapped it shut. Two small red pills remained resting in a large-boned, muscular hand. The tall man excused himself and left the room, pills in hand. Once out of sight of the others, he replaced the pills in the gold case and lifted the handset of a telephone.

“Quoth the Raven. Code, O.N.E., repeat one. Plans proceeding exactly on schedule. Tell Mr. Porpoise that Breelen’s is on its last legs,” he whispered into the phone. Without waiting for an answer he replaced the handset and returned to the group in the adjoining room, where the Board of

Directors of Breelen’s was meeting to decide the probable fate of their company. ,

“Gentlemen, we must hold out for a few days more. If we can swing the loan with Bristol we can crush those who would have crushed us,” the tall man said upon his return. “I will deal with the Bristol people personally, and I assure you, there isn’t a man in this room who is more aware of the outcome of this struggle if I fail.” He smiled for an instant, and then five grim men exited.

Three hundred miles away, a government radio operator was keying up two non-government sideband transmitters to pass on the message, “Code ONE, all is well.”

Chapter 11

“Where have all the Thrushes gone?”

“HEY, YOU GONNA sack out all night?”

Illya hiccuped into Malista’s frowning face, as she bent over him and forced him to open one eye. She let the eyelid drop, and he sank back into the drug Apis had injected. After an almost sleepless night before and a day of uninspiring flatfoot work capped by Porpoise’s water games, he was easily able to rationalize six to eight hours of peaceful, noble slumber.

The girl didn’t see it the same way. For one thing, she didn’t like the way he lay crookedly on the Spaceship Rooms wooden floor, one arm beneath him so that he’d wake with no circulation in it; for another, she wanted to know what was going on, and Illya looked like her only source of answers. “Wake up,” she said, prodding him and shaking his shoulder. “Wake up, fella. You’re uncomfortable.” That struck his funny bone, and called him up out of the velvet black pit where he’d been trying to nestle down. He belched, spewing a feeble half-mouthful of water on the floor, and twisted into a half-sitting position. “You’re opposed to the pursuits of night,” he muttered at Mai.

She leaned back on her haunches and laughed lightly. “No way” she said. “No way, Mr. Man. I am the most night-pursuit thing that ever happened to Long Island. I just didn’t like the idea of amputating your arm in the morning, when you finally rolled off it yourself.”

“Well, I’ll consider you the savior of my good right arm. If Thrush doesn’t take it off for me anyway; if they do we’ll have to call the whole thing off, right?”

“Thrush? What kind of a Thrush is gonna take off an arm?”

“Thrush stands for the Technological Hierarchy for the Removal of Undesirables and the Subjugation of Humanity.” Illya looked around at the three youngsters and the room they were trapped in. “From the looks of things, the four of us are Undesirables, and the last time I heard, Thrush had some very efficient methods of Removal. They don’t just call up the D.S.C. and send folks off to the Hudson.”

“Come on, Mal. This kook is some kind of a nut,” Andy said, rising. “Let’s split before someone comes back. Imagine trying to hold us prisoner in this dumb maze-you’d think we hadn’t memorized it or somethin’.” He started for the open alcove.

Illya grabbed an ankle and brought the boy down. “Hold it, speed kills, what’s the hurry? This room is only wired for sound, but the rest of the place is wired for death. Take it easy.”

Andy sat up, rubbing his bruised pride, and gave Illya a very strange look. “You serious? About Thrush and Removal, and wired for death and all?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “I guess Fatso is one of them, because I never saw anybody with more gadgets around to puff himself up in my life; looks pretty sick to me, but he never really bugged us before tonight. He messed Napoleon up good, though.”

“You know Napoleon?” Illya sat all the way up. “Where is he?”

“We found him on the beach, soaking wet and tom up one side and down the other. Messed up like that, he didn’t say word one about how he got that way,” Mal answered.

“Charlie here, Andy and I, we took him out past the boardwalk and caught him a cab. You a friend of his?”

“No , I’m Illya Kuryakin; we sort of work together.”

Andy spoke up again. “You sure-god aren’t Good Humor Men, to get these Thrush buggers mad at you.” All three sat patiently, letting the

implied question hang in the air. Illya leaned his head to one side, then the other, hitting himself to empty the water from his ears, before answering.

“We work for a kindly old gentleman who sends us out to get chopped to pieces, drowned, or shot up, for the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement.”

“U.N.C.L.E.,” said Charlie, and Mal laughed at the acronym.

“Well,” said Illya, “that is what we call ourselves. Napoleon and I are Enforcement Agents; we get sent out to clean up the sort of messes local police can’t handle.”

“Super fuzz,” said Charlie.

All three were looking at him in awe, and Illya began to feel uncomfortably the center of attention. Finally Malista spoke, breathing her words throatily.

“You’re a spy,” she said lovingly.

“Hey,” said Andy, “you got a fistful of superkill gizmos, like little bombs and wire dinghies?”

“I had, until Porpoise had me frisked. They took away all my weapons, radios, lockpicks, everything.”

“Napoleon is a spy, too,” said Mal, “and he didn’t even tell us.”

“It’s not the sort of thing you talk about, not if you plan to go on being a spy,” Illya explained. “The only reason I mentioned it is that we’re all prisoners together. You’ve got a right to know why Thrush is going to kill you.”

“Kill us,” spat Charlie, “is gonna take more than Arnold and Big Fats. I’d take on any three of that bunch. Any way. Fists, knives, bottles, chairs, or a long-range spitball contest.”

Andy chorused in, “No bunch of tweety-birds bugs us. We woulda laid them out on the beach, if they didn’t take us by surprise. At that, Charlie almost creamed the punk who jumped him, and you shoulda seen Mal hanging from Arnold’s nose by her teeth.”

Mal raised both hands, palms outward, and the boys quieted down. She talked to herself for a minute, smiling, her eyes focusing miles away, and then she chanted to the tune of *Where Have All the Flowers Gone?:*

“Where have all the Thrushes gone?

Long time passing.

Where have all the Thrushes gone? 1

Long time ago.

Where have all the Thrushes gone?”

Plucked by U.N.C.L.E. every one.

When will they ever learn?

When will they ever learn?”’

The two boys applauded, and Illya smiled at her, then looked down at the floor. “It certainly must be a wonderful thing,” he said, “to expect to take on these plug-uglies with bare hands. They aren’t even going to give us that chance. Most likely, Porpoise will tell Arnold to shoot us through a hole in the wall, and then float our bodies out over the billowing waters.

He’s scared right now, finding that you three knew about Napoleon, but any minute he’ll realize the smart move is to get rid of us.”

“Well, why are we just sitting here?” snapped the girl. “You’re a secret agent, even if you haven’t got all your gim-crack special skeleton keys and decoder badges. Can’t you get us out of here?”

“Out of here? There may not be any way out. Thrush doesn’t usually lock people in cages with exits provided, although Napoleon and I have occasionally made exits where they didn’t expect them.” Illya’s eyes lost their look of intensity for a moment as his mind followed a slippery clue; he focused hard on Mal, then. “You said you met Napoleon on the beach, soaking wet, didn’t you?” She nodded dumbly at him as he turned to look through the room.

A quick scan of the room convinced Illya that it had possibilities. “There’s no telling what the devices on that spaceship’s console can do,” he said. He moved close to the three, speaking quietly.

“Napoleon was locked up in this maze, and found a way out that dumped him in the water. All we really know is that they had him, and he got away, ending up by swimming ashore. With power on, I doubt he found his way through that Space Maze, so I intend to look for a way out right here. Sit where you are, and don’t set foot into the next room. I’ll vouch for the mazes deadliness.”

He turned to the mock-up of a spaceship console, and started spinning the control wheels and pushing levers from position to position. His first achievement was to black out the view of stars in the porthole nearby, and then the stars came back, spinning wildly.

“I think I’ve snapped us through hyper-space” he said, “and flipped into a tailspin, probably heading into the maw of a dead star.”

Another lever slowed the stars, and made them march grandly past the opening. He pushed a button, and all the stars went away except one, which turned out to be the sun Earth revolves around. Suddenly there were planets around old Sol, and the kids and Illya watched as they seemed to approach

the solar system. They flashed past Pluto, Neptune and Uranus quickly, and Illya found a switch to slow down the motion as they came near Saturn. The big ringed planet filled all of visible space, and then they went on, catching Jupiter and Mars, then Venus and Mercury, and skipping across the sun to find Earth. .

“It’s like the Planetarium,” said Mal, when the spell was broken by another switch, taking them back to interstellar space.

“It’s like being out there,” said Charlie. Illya looked at him, and saw that the boy was frozen in front of the porthole. He brought back Saturn and Mars-a few times, almost as much by chance as by skill, and then the trio went to sit down while he continued to work. Charlie made up a verse that went, “Where have all the planets gone?” and then the three of them were singing together, harmonizing through folksongs, one-world songs, and low-camp like *Don’t Sit Under the Apple Tree*.

They were building a tricky roundelay around the Batman theme when Illya accidentally triggered a meteor shower outside the porthole. The sudden silent fire, coupled with the tension of not knowing when Porpoise’s men would return for them, broke up the singing and started Illya’s palms itching.

He brushed sweat off his forehead, wishing he had so much as one U.N.C.L.E. wire-tracing device. Behind him as he bent back to the board, Mal’s clear voice came on strong with her new doggerel, “Where have all the Thrushes gone?” She finished the verse on a high note of fun and confidence, pounding on the floor with both hands.

Illya clapped, and the boys cheered heartily, raising the roof to relax their nerves. Before the noise had died down, Arnold opened the spacelock door and stepped through.

“Pipe down all that,” he said. “If you insist on singing and yelling, we can open up with gas in here. Tear gas, sleepy-drowsy, or vomit fumes.”

“You don’t suppose they’d have anything a little groovier, do you?” said Andy to Charlie, but Mal hushed him and stepped up to the Thrush.

“You aren’t going to tell us we have to give up the right to freedom of expression,” she said. “You aren’t saying we can’t sing, and be free. These are the things souls are made of, and you can kill our bodies, Arnold,” she said, shaking her head mournfully at him, “but you should never try to crush our souls.

“Singing does no harm, anyway. You’ve got good, sturdy walls, and that ugly little fat thing in the water has the best insulation in the world around him. We’re singing for us, and none of you in there has to listen to a note of it. Would you stifle pure, innocent fun? Are you some kind of superior beings, judging us and destroying our kind of art?” Before he could answer, she changed the subject and placed both hands on his shoulders.

“Arnold, what’s really bothering you is your poor nose, and I want to apologize for what I did to you out there on the boardwalk, when you jumped us from behind.” Arnold looked puzzled, trying to figure out why she was apologizing.

“You were just doing your job, protecting Mr. Porpoise’s funhouse from us. I only turned and bit your nose because I was surprised, that’s all. Really, it wasn’t because I was mad at you. You’re another person, with reasons for what you do, and you need food, warmth and love just the same as we do. We aren’t angry with you; in fact, we love you. We need to love you.”

“We do!” said the two boys, catching the rhythm of the spell Mal was weaving. Arnold tried to shrug off her hands, but she kept putting them back on his shoulders. Illya judiciously refrained from comment on the need to love Arnold.

“We love you because we see the real you. Everybody has an inner self that needs to find another person and love them. Were all like that, and were trying to find you right now.” She stepped closer, and Arnold stepped back. She pulled him towards her, trying to kiss his eyes, and he broke and jumped through the circular door.

“Look here. I’m going to lock this door, lock the door on the other side of it, and turn off the monitor in here. Sing anything you like, but lemme alone with that love stuff.” And he was gone, and the three kids hugged each other and Illya in a burst of stifled laughter at the routing of the dangerous little killer.

They rolled into song with new gusto then, singing purely for the sound of their own voices. Mai’s soprano led the others, and Illya added his second tenor whenever he wasn’t concentrating heavily on the switches and knobs of the console. Their exuberance carried through *Silver Dagger, Green-sleeves*, and more innovations with the verse-form of “Where have all the flowers gone?” before Illya had to concede that the spaceship console probably wasn’t going to show him the way out. He spun the dials one final time and muttered, “Napoleon found a way out of here.”

“You bet,” said Charlie. “Out of here, and into the drink, and all the way to the beach. But he looked like he must have traveled by way of a meatgrinder. Man, I hope you don’t find us the same way out.”

“Don’t knock it,” Andy answered. “If Arnold decides to come back and play some of his gas games we won’t be real happy with the world at all, at all.” The two took up humming the background to the old Greek song Mal was singing. Her fingers deftly rewove the flower coronet that the fight with Thrush had crushed. Of her audience, only Illya understood the words to the song, and as he examined the floor and walk of the Spaceship Room, inch by inch, he found himself joining in on the chorus.

“You’re good, Illya,” Mal said, breaking off the song. “Granted it’s not too swift being prisoners and all, but I’m glad to meet you. You know any more old songs?”

Illya straightened up from his fruitless search; his mind fled back to his childhood in Russia, the warm springs of Georgia, and the old Russian ballads filled his memory. The look of expectant pleasure on Mai’s face filled him with wonder. There was much to be said for a girl who could get excited over learning a folksong while faced with almost sure death.

He taught the three flower children the words of an old Russian lullaby. Charlie and Andy immediately went into a minor key harmony on the ancient tune, while Mai's pure soprano soared two octaves above to carry the melody. Illya wasn't sure that the song would put many babies to sleep, but he had to admit that their rendition was beautiful. The four continued singing, as Illya continued his search for any sort of doorway. Occasionally, one of the three would extend the doggerel of "Where have all the Thrushes gone?" to include another, even more improbable, continuation.

Every last inch of the Spaceship Room was finally inspected and probed, and no way out. Illya started to crawl into the adjoining alcove to the tune of *When the Saints Go Marching In.* The angled floor of their prison became perfectly horizontal in the alcove, and Illya stopped to inspect the juncture closely.

"This floor is steel!" he exclaimed, interrupting a complicated roundelay concerning porpoises. The three flower children rushed forward. "Keep singing!" the Russian commanded. "Keep Arnold and his crew at bay. This may be our ticket out."

The flower children took up their favorite doggerel with gusto, and Illya continued to test out his theory. The hairs on the back of his hand stood up and he snatched it back from the electric field. There was no telling just what that floor was charged for, whether to trigger a trap, or fry him on contact. His eyes detected that the wooden planking painted on the alcove floor had one subtle flaw. Two of the planks weren't split by just a painted crack. That crack was real, and the floor was really two slabs of steel, side by side.

"Keep on singing; I think I've found it," he said, as he searched his pockets for something to trigger the device. Finally his jacket was elected, his pockets being empty. He rolled the jacket into a ball, and, standing well back, tossed it into the alcove. The four prisoners watched it bounce from the far wall and descend to the floor. The floor snapped open to reveal a field of knives, and a figure in black.

The jacket fell into the knives, half in the ocean and half held up out of it. For many heartbeats no one said a word.

Chapter 12

“I’m all right, Doc”

NAPOLEON WOKE UP with the driver shaking him. They were drawing up before the tailor shop that fronted for U.N.C.L.E. headquarters. Del Floria came out to pay the fare and helped the wounded agent inside.

“I need a big dose of first aid,” said Napoleon, indicating the lacerations on his body that were starting to bleed again. “But I also need a change of clothes, Del. And I must speak with Mr. Waverly immediately.”

While he passed behind a curtain into the old brownstone and headed for the Medical Department, he knew the tailor was setting wheels in motion to have the U.N.C.L.E. personnel ready for him at every stage. He arrived at Medical to be stripped and examined by two doctors who operated without any sign of curiosity about the strangeness of the damage he’d survived. They probed each wound for pieces of wood and dirt, and pronounced him ready for the Mediclean unit.

“You can certainly be glad the bug-chaser is in working order tonight,” said one. “You’re riddled with splinters, and ordinary methods would probably just made a good cut at stopping infection. In a few days when it showed up, you’d have to go through everything over again. There aren’t any serious wounds, however, and you’re ready to get in.”

With a little help, Napoleon stepped into a tiled chamber and watched the door close behind, making a perfect seal. The little room was like a man-sized bullet, with barely space enough for him to move around. Overhead, the tile arched up to a dome, giving him space to raise both arms full over his head.

From every side a hissing noise preceded jets of warm disinfectant. The streams blasted his body from the chin down, and he closed his eyes and

worked the fluid into the pores of his face and made a shampoo of it for his salt stiffened hair. He moved about in the churning spray, rubbing his whole body to help penetration into every cut and abrasion.

A finer set of sprays followed the first, and he held his damaged members close to the nozzles, permitting atomized liquid to massage the hundreds of wounds. Soap and water, applied by warm, wide nozzles, doused him completely, and it was a very clean Napoleon who stood looking at his pink, wrinkled skin with pleasure when the floods stopped. Warmed air whipped around him, evaporating the last of the rinses completely, and then the chamber heated up. The floor stayed warm, but the walls steamed up and the air became moist and drew sweat out of him. He grinned at the tile, remembering Arnold's supersonic torture room in the Space House, comparing it to this friendly Swedish bath.

Another blast of air dried him, and he was ready to leave.

One doctor came to him to apply bandages to the severest cuts, preventing bleeding and later chances of infection. Napoleon found it hard to believe he'd ever been hurt, considering the euphoric feeling that followed his thorough shower. But the slashes in arms and legs were very real. Despite temporary lack of pain, he had to be bandaged heavily.

A new set of clothing waited outside the Mediclean laboratory, and he refused help in getting dressed. He smiled broadly at the doctor, feeling better than he had any time since his first encounter with Gambol hours before. "I'm all right, Doc," he said, and made his way out into the corridor under his own steam. He only allowed a pretty U.N.C.L.E. clerk to escort him to Waverly's office, he told himself, because he liked pretty girls.

"Mr. Solo, I am pleased to report that we have a definite lead on the distributor of stock secrets," said Waverly when Napoleon had seated himself at the circular conference table. "Mr. Kuryakin reported on your abduction by the broker Gambol, and while he drove after you he gave us the clue we needed to crack a rather intricate information-relay device. Departments of Finance, Research, and Cryptography have examined the market reports, and a certain crossword puzzle, with great success."

Napoleon sat upright, wondering if the night's escapades had deranged him somehow. "Crossword puzzle, sir? Crossword puzzle?"

"Indeed. While you were being led to Thrush through the actions of Mr. Gambol and his associates, Mr. Kuryakin discovered a communications link in today's crossword. It would seem that Avery D. Porpoise has been commanding his troops in a very curious manner. Of course, we have no definite proof against the man."

Napoleon looked at his chief for a moment, struck speechless by the news. He stared at Waverly, at the bank of computers and tape drives behind Waverly, and at the bandages on his own arms and hands. "I've just been knocked around and snatched, chased and imprisoned by a gang of Thrushes," he said. "They live in the biggest no-fun funhouse on Coney Island, working for a bad-humor man named Avery D. Porpoise. If on top of all the other trouble that that soggy little butterball caused me today he is also writing crosswords for Illya to solve, I'm going to devise some totally original and excruciatingly slow death for him. I always thought you had to sit up all night with a toothache to make up crossword puzzles."

Waverly allowed himself to look slightly amused. "I have here the dossier on your intended victim, which covers what we know of his history up to a few years ago. When Mr. Kuryakin's hunch pointed to him, we put together what is known of him and found him to be a most unique individual. I would caution you, however, that torture will in all likelihood not affect him in the least."

He put the folder down in front of him, and spun the table to position it directly before Napoleon. The data on Porpoise was unspectacular up to a point. Under Identifying Marks, some researcher had summarized all that had been or ever would be of interest concerning Avery D. Porpoise:

> On 2 August, 1944, Maj. Porpoise, then in British Intelligence, was captured by Nazi agents while entrusted with a high priority mission in the north of France. The pressure of German High Command conflicts and backlash from the attempted murder of Hitler the preceding month threw the lone Intelligence officer into an unreal focus, and Nazi

doctors became almost maniacal in their attempts to wring his mission from him.

Imprisonment and starvation had no effect on him except to strengthen his resolve not to talk. Collateral reports from others held nearby verify that he became completely convinced that the security of his nation depended on his continued secrecy, although in point of fact the mission's failure had crippled a Resistance effort and the whole story could subsequently have been told. Maj. Porpoise did not allow this in the face of questions, and his inquisitors could only keep digging for what seemed to be a vital message.

Enduring privation gave him an inner source of power for what came next. Hitler's growing irrationality forced the prison doctors to burn the captives hair and eyebrows. His stoicism at the pain and the High Command's orders made them follow up with a systematic destruction of his beard follicles, and then application of fire torture to every patch of hair anywhere on his body. Pelvic, limb and pubic hair were scorched off, and today Avery D. Porpoise is covered with white scar tissue, completely bald.

"He's a repulsive little beast in the flesh," said Napoleon, "but I didn't see enough of him to notice all that." He flipped the dossier back to Waverly with a shudder.

"Those scars on his body are actually marks of great heroism, despite his current activities, and despite the misplacement of his heroism. He's somewhat less than a man, now, crisscrossed with scar tissue and turned obscenely fat through years of self-indulgence, but one must conclude that his pain threshold is superhumanly high when inspired as he was in World War II.

"It was his misfortune, however, that the Crown did not reward his refusal to talk under such treatment. His Majesty's government naturally awarded him a 60% disability pension for life, and the Prisoner of War ribbon with, I believe, a bronze star. To indicate the torture, I suppose. They

were quite uninterested in his story of saving the nation, because after all the mission he had started on was a thorough fizzle."

"Kind of hard-nosed, I'd say. What else did he want?"

"A medal wasn't quite enough, we can assume. He resigned his commission when they didn't make him a general, and he never claimed a shilling of the pension."

"Probably he just wanted somebody to clap him on the back and give him the 'Jolly good show, old chap!' routine," said Napoleon. "A promotion-yes, Porpoise would have wanted recognition on all sides. He was probably sorry England didn't have an opening for the job of King just at that time."

Waverly frowned slightly. "In any event, he sold out in disgust to the highest bidder. His recent knowledge of the Intelligence service was considered very valuable, and for a while it looked as though post-war German underground operatives would get him. But he joined the neighborhood covey of Thrush in early 1947. All his subsequent activity has been in England and Africa, an undistinguished career in Thrush's financial department. We noted his entry into this country, but from that point he seemed to have gone into retirement. If Major Porpoise had continued in His Majesty's service he might well have become a member of U.N.C.L.E. by now. As it is, we will all be relieved to close out his file." Waverly shut the folder and dropped it into a crowded basket of files.

"We'll close out his file well enough," Napoleon said with a frown. "Now that Illya has, if you'll excuse the expression, solved the crossword puzzle. I only wish he could have managed the timing a bit better; I'd really rather not have spent the last few hours the way I did."

"Speaking of timing, Mr. Solo," his chief answered, a touch of concern coloring his usually dry tones. "I believe Mr. Kuryakin entered Mr. Porpoise's establishment just as you were making your exit. You both might have improved upon your timing. Further, and more to the point," said Waverly, "is the distressing lack of communication in the past hour. At last word he was on the beach at Coney Island, intending to head into the Space

House to rescue you. Naturally we couldn't risk contacting him when you showed up in such abused condition, but it is well past the alarm point; he certainly should have called in before this."

"I came out a side door, sir, and he may well have been taken by the search party that was sent out to get me. I didn't know he was there. If he went in and didn't report, they probably have him; some of the residents of that fun house are far from slouches, and the place itself is wired for sight, sound and general unpleasantness. May I suggest the obvious course is a full-force attack on the pier, to retrieve Illya if he's there, and wipe out the nest?"

"As Chief Enforcement Officer, that is precisely your area of responsibility, Mr. Solo. From the information we have been able to gather, you will be removing the core of this stock market fiasco at the same time. You may use my desk, if you wish." With a gesture, Waverly took one of his pipes and began pacing the room, tamping it. Napoleon slipped into the vacated chair of command, and tripped a switch on the communications panel before him.

"Yes, sir?" said a girl's voice from elsewhere in the building.

"Solo," he said. "Get me the Enforcement Duty Agent, and while I'm on the line with him please find the supervisor of our STEP coordinating team and ask him to come into this office for a word with me."

"Yes, sir."

"Two other things. Alert the helicopter to stand by for me starting thirty minutes from now for a run to Long Island; and if Mr. Kuryakin reports at any time, interrupt me immediately and tie him in here."

The Enforcement Agent standing the night duty was delighted to talk to his superior. Napoleon smiled for the first time with real excitement as he felt the enthusiasm surging through the phone.

"Matt, I want your squad to meet me in ten minutes down in the Communications area, in laboratory 17C. We're going to get Illya out of a

jam, and I want to brief you on it down there."

"Yes, sir!" snapped the communicator. "We'll be there with bells on, chief; all we've done all week is shine our gear, except for the day-men who backed up your action in the brokerage. Our night crew is getting pretty itchy."

Napoleon looked up from the communicator to greet the long-faced U.N.C.L.E. man entering Waverly's office.

"I'm sorry not to be more familiar with your work, Dr. Angers," he said, offering a seat while Waverly stood by, watching. "I must confess most of my activities have been confined to dry land. Let me outline our current problem, and ask your help in solving it."

Spinning the conference table, Napoleon placed a map of Coney Island in front of Angers. "We plan to assault this amusement pier by land, with a standard operation by my Enforcement personnel. However, I'm afraid this attack will fail in one important respect, in that it will give the Thrush contingent time to kill Illya Kuryakin. We have reason to believe he's held captive there, but Thrush has had no incentive to harm him yet; we don't want to give them a chance.

"Now, I escaped from the fun house atop this pier via a trapdoor opening into the sea. This exit is designed as a fall onto a bed of knives, and it's safe to assume Thrush would be taken by surprise if we entered that way. I visualize the whole thing starting with men placed under the trapdoor-can you get me in as far as that starting point?"

Angers looked to Waverly and Solo for permission, and started loading a big curved pipe that made his face look even longer and sadder. "I believe I know how to get you in, and at the same time stop anyone else who might try to get out." His audience waited while he pulled on the well-used old pipe, examining the map with one eye. He looked up from the map and analyzed the visible bandages on Solo, comparing them with tie calm story of escaping the death-trap. "If you can get up past those knives, I can get you to the pier, and mount a solid guard while you do it.

“We have men training in conjunction with the Navy’s Submerged Test Engineering Platform operation. They were working together at the Brooklyn Naval Yard facility until military spending was curtailed and the Yard had to be closed; thereafter, the Navy has been using our undercover training grounds as a base for STEP in this area.

“One of our men has been accepted by STEP’s marine mammals, and now serves part-time as their trainer. If we didn’t have him there, the Navy would probably furnish enough men; but he’s one of U.N.C.L.E.‘s best frogmen, and I know he can position four harbor seals around that pier in an iron pattern. You couldn’t slip past his seals even if you knew where they were. He, and one of the animals, can take you in from the sea to any point you name. While you’re about your business, they’ll be on guard waiting for word.”

“Great. I can get to Jamaica Bay in a few minutes by copter. While I’m getting my land team ready, I’d appreciate your help in alerting STEP’S U.N.C.L.E. operatives that we want to mount a top priority mission within the hour.”

As Napoleon stood up, Waverly spoke.

“You’ll lead them yourself, then?” he asked. He didn’t need to mention the night’s work and the ravages Napoleon had sustained so far.

“As Chief Enforcement Officer …”

“Mr. Solo, I know your responsibilities. But I hardly need point out that you’ve put your body through a rather brutal evening and it could probably use some rest. An undersea expedition just now would be most difficult, finishing up with an unpredictable but potentially dangerous reception at the hands of Thrush.”

“But I’ve come down through that trapdoor, and I know exactly what it looks like. I know the layout of that Space House, and the size force we’re likely to encounter. You can send another man in if you wish, sir, but in my opinion a little local anesthetic will numb these cuts. This display isn’t a

shaving nick compared to what those Thrushes will do to Illya if we muff our attack."

Waverly cleared his throat, frowning. "There is no question of removing you from the operation, unless you elect to place yourself on sick call. If your condition degenerates to the point that someone else must perform that service for you, it will be the first time in your career. You must pick the man best suited for the job, and I can do nothing but remind you not to involve the United States Navy in any way." Waverly and Solo looked at each other, and both understood.

As Napoleon left, Waverly continued to work on his pipe and to pace. He waved to Dr. Angers to sit in his chair, and the pacing continued while Angers made arrangements for the task force Napoleon had requested.

Below, Napoleon strode into laboratory 17C to find Matt and eight men sitting and smoking, waiting for him. He greeted all of them, and went right to the end of the room where Illya had demonstrated the 315 data-display optical device. He stared at it for a few seconds, and then started moving his hands over the console as Illya had done. Power came up, and he got a picture.

"Gentlemen, here is New York City. With a few adjustments we can focus in on Long Island. So. The computer can then take us close in, expanding the aerial view to show just the south part, near Lower Bay." He talked more smoothly, finding the controls relatively simple when once started.

"Now, with this two-mile stretch of Coney Island in view, I think we can discuss the assault. Here, near the roller coaster, is an amusement pier with a sprawling funhouse at one end." The maps, drawn by cathode rays from digital photograph recordings, could only show major topographical features where Napoleon wished he could have the original photographs. He noticed sadly that there were no golden blips on the screen-but it was hardly likely Thrush would let Illya keep his tracer once inside the funhouse.

"You want us to crash a funhouse, Chief?" asked Matt.

“I want you to come down on this beach in a skirmisher’s formation, and half-circle the funhouse. From as far away as you can see each other, I want you to wait in the sand for my signal. When you get it, you’re to move in close, tighten up the circle approximately here, so the nine of you will be only five or six yards apart”—he used a pencil to point to positions on his automatic map, relative to the pier —“and turn on the full Flush Routine.”

“Just get ‘em out?”

“Right. We have no reason to do anything but detain anyone coming out of there. Later, we may get them on charges of kidnapping, illegal possession of weapons, and a dozen others; right now, we want to get in and get Illya out of there. I’ll be hitting them from behind, off a submarine, and trying to give them good reason to let you flush them.”

“And what’s the signal?”

“If things continue all night as they’ve been going, every light in that building will be on when we get there. If so, and if I don’t have to resort to flares or an explosion to notify you, I’ll tell you to strike by simply turning all those lights out.”

His men grinned as they pictured the scene. “Lights out,” said Matt, “and we turn on our floodlights and bullhorns, and invite the gentlemen outside for a little *parlez-vous.”*

The unit was on its way out their assault exit, fully armed and equipped, when Napoleon strapped himself in the U.N.C.L.E. copter’s jump seat. The pilot hovered for a moment near the Pan Am building to avoid the flight pattern of the commercial chopper from Kennedy Airport, then he stood his little machine on its side and put on full speed across the river. Fifteen minutes after leaving Matt and the land task force, Napoleon was debarking from his helicopter near the north, seldom used gate of Floyd Bennett Field in Long Island.

Section IV : “All’s well that ends.”

Chapter 13

“Is there a Berlitz course in Seal?”

BEFORE THE copters blades stopped, two dungareed sailors blocked down the wheels, and a bright young ensign helped Napoleon to the ground.

“Do I have to request permission to come aboard?” he asked.

“No, sir,” replied the ensign. “And the nearest fantail is across the harbor in drydock, so you don’t have to salute anything, either. But they’re waiting for you in the Sea-Lab area, if you’ll come with me.”

They took a jeep across the tarmac and through the air-base’s north gate, the ensign driving with Napoleon hanging on in the passenger seat. A nearly invisible path of dry, level earth led through the marshland north of Bennett, facing Jamaica Bay, and took them on a roundabout path curving through mazes of low trees that hid them from the base and the nearest civilian housing. The young ensign pulled up abruptly, with his lights picking out a single long building painted battleship gray. He got out first, and almost made it around the jeep to hold the other door before Napoleon shook himself free of the panic handle and got out unaided.

“Through this door, sir,” he said, unlocking the building. “We will be met before we penetrate to the training rooms.”

Once out of the cold they found themselves in a long corridor with no interesting tourist attractions. Their shoes echoed dully along asphalt tile, blending with a steady vibration almost below hearing level from all sides. The whole establishment seemed alive with sounds of steady activity and a beating of ocean. Nothing relieved the sound and the monotonous color scheme until they had traveled half the length of the corridor, when the far door opened.

The ensign kept on up to within three paces of the man who entered, and saluted smartly, getting a friendly nod in return.

“Mr. Solo, this is Lieutenant-Commander Bransen. He’s the U.N.C.L.E. representative in STEP’s program and will accompany you from here.” He turned to go, visibly fighting an urge to salute Napoleon.

The new escort was a tall Norwegian in dark-blue denim trousers and an ancient-looking sweater. He seemed to wear his rank lightly-he looked more like a fisherman plying the herring trade in some sub-zero fjord than a Navy officer. “Call me Gus,” he said, holding out one big hand in greeting. “We’re all ready to get the show on the road, as soon as you and I suit up. How would you like to go to the check-out area by way of the zoo?”

With no more ado, he turned and led the way through to the “zoo,” a high-ceilinged room with four seals and a submarine waiting in a sea-water pool. The pool took up over half the room’s area, and had plenty of room for the sub and some rocks to serve as rest stops for the seals.

“We don’t hold much with saluting here,” said Bransen, referring to the youngster who had introduced them, “mainly because our most able-bodied ‘seamen’ can’t get their flippers up to eyebrow level. This pool is where they come to visit, to look at freaks who choose to spend most of their time on dry land. We zoo-animals get walruses, sea lions, dolphins and elephant seals as visitors, with an occasional experimental whale. They’re a lot better behaved on the whole than the visitors at most other zoos-for instance, I’d balance them any day against the lot who go down to Coney zoo to watch Oscar the Walrus get fed.”

“Well, Commander, I must say you run a pretty tight-

ah-zoo, here. Do your visitors just come and go when they feel like it?”

“Almost. There’s a depth-compound outside here we keep fenced in, and they’re free to roam all through it, up, down and sideways. New trainees are brought in aboard ship or in tow, through gates that we keep secured other times. We let recruit frogmen get the hang of their equipment by assigning them patrol duty repairing the fence. Frequently the marine

mammals are rotated by our request, other times by Navy requirements to train other breeds in the close coordination techniques we've developed here.

"Right now you're kind of lucky. The current project involves testing out our diver-mammal linkage by scouring the local bay and river bottoms for junk that's been dumped here during the past four centuries. We've been using these four harbor seals"-he waved his hand at the quartet of wet noses and whiskers pointing at him-"and from the word headquarters sent, I'd say these are the best workers we could have for your job."

He bent down at the water's edge and snapped his fingers loudly twice. One of the seals separated from the group and scudded in, leaving almost no wake. Before Napoleon could blink, the animal was out of the water and balancing on its flippers, barking in Bransen's face. As smoothly as if he were doing an Orpheum circuit routine at the Palace, Bransen reached into his trousers pocket and pulled out a quarter. The seal sniffed it, and then watched suspiciously while he flipped it out into the pool.

The seal stayed, looking from Bransen to the pool, until he barked rapidly like one of them. Then it did a side-flip, hitting the water belly up, and Napoleon could make out an underwater twist, a sudden nipping motion, and a quick reversal. Before the quarter could have sunk to the bottom it was back neatly deposited on the deck at Bransen's feet. With magnificent elan the seal twisted around and rejoined the other three on the rocks.

"What on earth did you say to it?" asked Napoleon.

"Her, not it. Her name is Sourpuss, and I told her to go get that coin before it hit bottom, and bring it back here. If she wasn't in a particularly unplayful mood tonight, I might have bought an eyeful of quarter plus salt water-usually when I give her quick instructions, she does things like spit in my eye." He reached out and took back the quarter and pocketed it. -

"All that?" asked Napoleon. "It's a very economical language. I suppose your finger-snapping told them which one you wanted."

“Right. Each seal has a number, and I call more than one at a time with a little code of hand-claps. That’s the first thing we take on ourselves to teach a new animal, and the others help newcomers learn. They have a pecking order as strict as Naval rank, and sometimes I think they even help us learn the code. After you’ve worked with a team of them, and worked with the personnel who have been on SEALAB n, you pick it up. It’s far more subtle than a system of numbers and acoustic emergency signals, but you pick it up.”

“I imagine a two-way dictionary would be pretty hard to compile, though, Gus. Is there a Berlitz course in Seal?”

“Oh, for tonight, you won’t have to talk to them. I ve been working here as a trainer almost since I joined U.N.C.L.E.‘s underwater division, and you and I will go in with them. That sub will take us up to a position offshore from your pier, and my whiskered quartet will be right there with us. After we group, all six of us will tear into the ungodly right on their soft white underbelly.”

Napoleon looked out at the fishy smelling group with its eight black eyes staring straight at him. “That’s quite a job for two men and four seals.”

“After a man has been down below with a team of them and recovered the ruins of Dutch exploration ships and Yankee clippers from New York Harbor, he kind of gets the feeling that these fellows are unbeatable.” He leaned against a pillar, and flipped four fish from a canvas bucket out to the seals. All four fish were caught neatly, with much barking and smacking. “You know how delicately an archeologist picks up each thimbleful of sand when he’s near a find-imagine trying to resurrect ships that have been down on the dark river bottom since the time of Henry Hudson. They’re in worse condition than the tomb of Cheops, I figure, and for that kind of heavy, controlled work I’ll take the strong backs and sensitive noses of my team, any day.”

In the dressing room, Napoleon found a wetsuit laid out for him. “Just your size,” said Bransen. “Mr. Waverly sent your measurements over while you were sky-riding, and asked that you please not get your new suit wet.”

“Should I strip for this?” Napoleon looked over the black rubber suit and watched Bransen don his own gear right over his clothes.

“Not at all. When we can fit you as closely as this, you can put the suit on over full evening dress, swim miles, and step out with your white dinner jacket dry and uncreased. You get a lot better fit this way than we ever got overseas.” Strapping and zipping himself in, Napoleon looked at Gus. “Frogman?”

“Yup. Sixteen months Search and Destroy in the Bay of Haiphong. I just got rotated back here a year ago, and elected Reserve duty so I could sign up with U.N.C.L.E. Stateside Navy work just didn’t have the feel I wanted-in the Regulars, I’d probably be a full Commander by now, pushing a pencil instead of suiting up to invade Coney Island. With U.N.C.L.E.‘s underwater activities, training the Navy people during their programs here, and working with all kinds of the sea folk, I’ve had more than my fill of action.” For a moment they couldn’t talk, helping each other check out connections on their scuba apparatus and getting used to the bite of their mouthpieces.

“I do more than just salvage work,” said Bransen as he helped check Solo’s weapons compartments. “I was an observer with the unit that brought up the nuclear device off Spain—just in case our side missed, U.N.C.L.E. wanted to make sure no one else made a successful grab. We danced around with a team of sea-going Thrushes for days, while everybody wondered if we’d have to detonate it to keep them from getting it.”

Bransen was standing in front of Napoleon, adjusting his visor for maximum peripheral view. Napoleon looked through his face-plate and through Bransen’s, squarely into a pair of steel-blue eyes with the flat look that gets into a man who’s seen it all. U.N.C.L.E. was a hard enough taskmaster on land, but the underwater squad seemed to work just as hard, under tons of pressure in an environment that would snuff out human life as quickly as outer space would. Given a knife-fight with Thrush underwater, Napoleon thought, he’d bounce right in for the old team.

They finished checking each other out, and carried their swim-fins out to the submarine’s berth. As they climbed aboard, Napoleon noted that the

four seals had been fitted with harnesses stenciled “U.N.C.L.E.”

“That’s so the Navy can’t be implicated in case some of us are intercepted,” said Gus. “Those are four prisoners who won’t talk, and all Thrush or anyone else can learn is that they were working for us.”

They found snug nooks inside the sub, and Bransen made as good a round of introductions as possible, considering that six of the eight-man crew responded by welcoming Solo over the intercom system. Before he had been “shown around” the sub from his station, they were out the sea-lock into the bay, through the fence, and turning south, routed for Coney.

“Are your unbarbered quartet keeping up?” Solo asked.

“If they aren’t, I won’t let them back in the zoo to feed the people. We’ve made this kind of run before, and the sub is pacing them at their top cruising speed. They can actually outrun us for short distances, but everybody wants them to arrive relaxed where the action is. Each seal has to surface twice during the run, so our periscope is up, elevated to leave a wake they can track. When we move into a re-group formation off the pier, I expect to step out the conning tower amid a chorus of happy barks from my friends. Each one gets a fish-flavored candy at that point, and then we really move into high gear.”

The submarine came to a churning halt off Coney Island’s beach, tower above water, half a mile offshore in line with Porpoise’s pier. Solo and Bransen synchronized their watches with the crew, climbed up the ladder, and undogged the hatch to find themselves surrounded by the four eager seals. While the candy was going down long gullets and the animals were as close to purring as a seal can get, the two men fixed each other’s tanks and donned their flippers. Napoleon waved goodbye to the stars, and they slid over the side.

Bransen made sure Napoleon had a good grip on the cow named Sourpuss and took a big male for himself. Holding the harness made enough work for both hands as the animals turned on top speed and headed for land. The other two seals remained on guard, fanned out from the submarine and alert for any land of action. The same sentry duty served

when they watched poised near Navy divers, using their tremendous sensitivity to their own environment as an improvement over watch-dogs and radar scanners.

The pair of man-seal units went in parallel to the pier, not under it, as Bransen had no desire to swim right into a bed of knives. Just as they reached the approximate location of the trap door from the Space Maze, Sourpuss turned and arrowed over to her mate to nudge Bransen in the shoulder. He looked at her and slapped his chest twice in command, but she pushed her black nose into his shoulder again. He shrugged, and signaled a return to the surface.

"She's seen something way out of the ordinary," he said, "and I doubt it's the knives you warned us about. She knows what a pier should look like around here-she's been near here about a dozen times. And she wouldn't shy from those knives until we were nearly on top of them if they've been in the sea for a long time. She's one of the canniest big bitches I've ever worked with."

He barked at Sourpuss, and she pointed off toward the beach, at the base of the pier.

"She wants me to let her investigate something. She's not afraid of it; it's just something unusual, something she doesn't think belongs in the ocean. If I'm any judge of seal hunches, we ought to take a minute and follow this up." They pulled down their masks and submerged again.

Sourpuss led the way in when they gave her her head. Under the pier, she stopped abruptly, went back over to Gus, and nosed his shoulder again. Nestled cosily on an opened sphere of metal was a flying saucer, reflecting their flash-beams' red light like Detroit's newest chrome bumper.

"Did you see that?" asked Bransen when they surfaced again. "If that isn't something straight out of *The Day The Earth Stood Still*, I'm hallucinating. What's a baby flying saucer doing underwater?"

"Well, I doubt that Thrush has an alliance with the Martians," said Napoleon. "Whatever it is, I'm willing to bet that the gang upstairs will be

planning on it being there, and they'll be considerably discomfited if it isn't, all of a sudden." He looked at Sourpuss and her boyfriend, and turned to Bransen. "Do you think these two huskies could tow it out to sea, and give it to the submarine for safekeeping? We can wonder about what it is later at your base, when we can take it apart and decide why Thrush would want one."

"Easy enough. If it navigates underwater, its weight ought to be balanced almost to an ounce. All we have to do is get it moving, and I think the two of them can do that. If not, I can get in behind and push, and even call in the other pair for more muscle with my sonar signal."

"They better come in immediately, then. You get all four in position and tie them onto it, and I'll make the assault on my trapdoor alone. If I can't do it alone, it possibly can't be done-besides, I think it's designed to let people out suddenly, not to keep out surprise visitors." He looked around.

"We're already attacking Porpoise from two directions. I think that that saucer would be set to sound an alarm if anyone tampers with it, and then he'll have what looks like three sides jumping him. I want you to be ready to move out on the double when your watch says quarter to the hour. I'll have plenty of time to get inside by then, and give the signal to my crew on the beach simultaneously with your little hijacking job. With all that trouble hitting at once, Fatty won't know which way to belch "first. In point of fact, if I may be permitted a small conclusion jump, I suspect that this saucer is his way out in case of trouble-maybe we'll really give him an ulcer."

With that, Napoleon headed back for the trapdoor and its bed of knives. He was still dragging a little from the punishment his body had been taking. "The cuts and bruises wouldn't be so bad," he subvocalized around his mouthpiece, "if only I could get some sleep once in a while." He thanked his stars that the pain-killer U.N.C.L.E. doctors used wasn't habit-forming, but he hadn't thought to ask if the pep-shots were.

Knives started showing up in his field of vision with an infra-beam sort of eerieness. He worked his way through the outer ones until he got up to the steel briar patch that waited under his trapdoor.

He hung his flippers on a nearby twelve-inch butcher knife, and strapped on a pair of telephone lineman’s spurs. Two very careful climbing steps brought him up under the latticed framework supporting the crisscrossed blades. From the pouch at his hip he took a tube not unlike a container of toothpaste. Squeezing the tube underwater proved to be more of a job than he had anticipated, but with growing skill he managed to get a minimum amount of the gray paste spread over key bars of the framework. Casting the empty remains of the tube well away from his point of vantage he depressed the plunger on his wristwatch. The burst of radio signal worked as well underwater as it ever had on the surface: the gray paste flamed brightly, and Napoleon felt the water warming momentarily.

Instead of falling clear as planned, the section of the bladed platform that Napoleon had freed from the rest jammed in place. The U.N.C.L.E. agent looked bleakly at his would-be doorway to the trap above. There was none of the incendiary paste left, and he wasn’t carrying a jemmy. For a lack of a better tool, Napoleon jabbed at the framework with his U.N.C.L.E. Special. The loosened rectangle of steel and knives lifted off the obstruction, twisted, taking the pistol from his hand, and slid through the opening into the depths. Napoleon picked his way around the few knives remaining. It was quick work climbing the piling he had shinnied up hours before with naked legs. He worked easily, with no waste motion, glorying in the leverage he had with spurs.

Now that I’m here, two feet from it, I suppose there must be a best way to get back into this trap, he thought. Imagine making something for falling through. There’s much more to be got here by climbing up into it. His eyes roved over the door s underside and its meshing with the pier, while he mentally selected each of the gadgets, in turn, that he carried tucked in pockets and compartments of the wetsuit.

I could insert a throwing knife, figuring that it would cut the electric beam, so I could climb through while the door was open. But probably a thermite bomb is best. Fulminate of mercury is a good clean idea, but I have to stick it out right here while it goes off-too hot. He leaned out over the knives, looking at the floor’s slit to find a convenient lip for the bomb, and found none. A little instant-epoxy will stick it onto that steel, he decided.

The bomb in place, he found his flare pistol and got ready to signal Matt and the land team when he was ready to start. But he didn't get a chance to trigger the pistol or the bomb, because the door sprang open without a touch from him, and a rolled-up jacket fell through.

He was immensely relieved to recognize the jacket, and the head that looked down through the floor at him.

"Good timing, Illya," he said quietly. "When it closes, wait a minute for me to recover my bomb and get in position, then spring it again. Or can't you spare any more dirty laundry?"

Napoleon grinned up at his partner, wondering how long it would be before Illya found his voice to toss back a retort. But when the Russian spoke, it was only to yell back over his shoulder, "Sing louder! Sing a lot louder!"

Before Napoleon could figure that out, the halves of the door slammed together again, and he shifted to be ready for the next opening. Thermite and flare gun went back into their proper compartments, and he swayed backwards from the pole, removing his feet from their spurs and standing on the little steel gadgets that were designed to dig into any kind of wood at a slight pressure, and hold their position under hundreds of pounds on each spur. Legs bent to push him upward, he waited for Illya to make the floor do its trick for him again.

"Sing louder," Illya said over his shoulder. Mal and the boys reacted like trained militia, bouncing into *When the Saints Go Marchin' In* just as the Russian reopened the trapdoor. He said "Allez!" as loud as he dared and Napoleon shouted "Oop!" back at him.

The trap snicked shut again, with Napoleon safely up in the Spaceship Room. The kids clustered around him joyously, pumping his hands until they realized he was wincing under the affection. "You're all bandaged up!" said Mai.

“Well, those cuts haven’t gotten in much healing time in the last six hours. The surface anesthesia keeps them from hurting too much, except when you pound on them in outbursts of affection. But how did you three get mixed up with such bad company as Illya?”

“Oh, when we left you, Arnold and his mob snuck up on us, while we were watching Illya enter the Space House. I’m not surprised at them catching these two poor fish”—she indicated Charlie and Andy, who struck Peter Pan poses of offended pride—“but me! They actually snuck up on me and jumped me, when I’ve been living for a year on this beach with a clean record. Tonight I’m just angry, trying to get out of here; but starting tomorrow I don’t think I’ll be able to live with myself.”

Illya said, “Then we really ought to get down to business. Napoleon, I hope you brought some extra weapons for me, since you must have known my tracer ended here.”

“I have a small knife, a communicator, a pistol, and lots of miscellany for you, but especially I have an extra pair of infrared goggles, because at exactly fifteen minutes before the hour I’m going to start an attack on Porpoise by turning off the power and seeing how our pudgy friend likes his hothouse pool at winter temperatures.”

“But what will we do with our friends? I’m sure they would be handy to have along for fighting, but …”

“We can take a hint,” said Mal. “You just turn off the power. We’ve spent hours and hours in every funhouse maze at Coney, and once this one stops dumping people in the ocean and exploding at them we should be out the front door in one minute.”

“When I turn off their power, they’ll be attacked from the land as well. When you reach that front door, I recommend you go out with your hands up, just like you were surrendering, and let the men there sort you out from Porpoise’s agents later. Once you get to Matt, stick with him and you’ll be all right.” Looking at his watch, he twisted to remove a device something like a lightbulb from a packet on the back of his belt. With a boost from Illya, he removed the ceiling bulb and replaced it with U.N.C.L.E.Y device.

“When I tap that bulb,” he said, “it will do more than just bum out some single power source. It’s a timed charge, to bum out three power sources as they come into play, just in case Porpoise has more than one auxiliary dynamo to switch in on these lines. Can you kids be certain of getting through in the dark?”

The three looked at each other in mock pain, and Charlie stepped forward. “Sir, we have snuck into this maze individually and collectively at least once a week all summer. We used it to sack out, odd times last winter until they took to guarding it now and then. We are perhaps the world’s greatest living authorities on this funhouse, and it is an attack on our professional pride for you to doubt that we could get through it blindfold, backward, on one leg, and singing Gregorian chants.” He did an about face, two stiff goose-steps away, and then did a half-twist back flip that landed him nose-to-nose with Napoleon. “Do I get the job, chief?” he asked brightly.

“You could replace Russ Tamblyn, Marlon Brando and Lassie,” replied Napoleon. “But we’ll have to take your word for your abilities in the maze. In thirty seconds I tap that bulb, and you wait for the lights to go out, flash on, and go out twice more. The bulb fires three times and you can’t risk the maze before the third power source has been given the kibosh. If there are that many.”

“One thing more,” said Charlie. “I think I ought to jump up and hit that gizmo for you. You’ve been through a lot for a guy your age, and remember what lousy condition you were in when we found you on the beach. You couldn’t even take on two little kids like Andy and me; we wouldn’t want you tiring yourself, considering how much more you’re gonna go through.”

Before Napoleon could protest or Charlie could turn, Andy leaped without saying anything, slapped the bulb, and landed in total darkness.

Before Andy was back on his feet and standing erect, the lights blinked, and stayed off. “If he’s got a third power supply for this kind of emergency,” said Charlie, “I bet he can’t find it in the dark. Let’s hit that

maze and see if we can't get out there before all of Fatty's goons come out crying because they're afraid with the lights out."

As six healthy young feet slapped through the trapdoor room, Napoleon called after them, "Remember, the men out there are only expecting Thrushes or us-go out with your hands up, let them arrest you with no shooting, and we'll get you sorted out later."

He hoped they heard him. In seconds, the turns of the Space Maze cut off their laughing and calling to each other in the dark.

"Now that our scout troop has fled, I'd better give you your gun and we can get this show on the road," Napoleon said. From one pocket came the remaining U.N.C.L.E. Special, and from another he drew a packet of ferral paste.

With two quick motions, he spread the super-thermite around the edges of the spacelock door, and he and Illya stepped back to press against the wall on either side. As the paste became exposed to oxygen it flickered quickly into clinging white fire which they allowed to bum until, instead of solid steel, the door was held in place only by a few remaining half-liquid threads of metal. Napoleon stepped back from the door and put one foot into it, opening the way into Porpoise's inner sanctum to the accompaniment of a titanic bass gong as the spacelock fell.

Chapter 14

“Why should I lie?”

TOTAL DARKNESS filled the Space House. Walls, built to keep unwanted trespassers from glimpsing any Thrush activity, acted just as well to keep what little night light there was along the deserted beachfront from illuminating any of Porpoise’s lair. Arnold, his fingers acting as his eyes, quickly laid out his master’s rubber suit, while Apis, freed from the dead control console, trod silently toward the Spaceship

Room. He flexed the long rippling muscles of his back and shoulders and grinned expectantly.

A small explosion told Apis of the opening of the spacelock, and he sped towards the entrance to the maze. His eyes began to adjust to the translucent glow of the glassite ceiling. Dim shadows took on various shades of black and gray where only black had been before.

A blow across his kidneys and a two-handed chop to his neck stopped him. He reached out blindly with both hands as his unseen attacker delivered a karate kick that would have disabled a lesser man.

Illya, having delivered the three blows, traveled on, leaving Apis for Napoleon to finish off. His own target was Porpoise, and accordingly he wasn’t wasting time with underlings, much as he would have liked to even up the score a bit for Apis’s water games.

Apis stretched his arms out wide, groping for anything or anybody. Napoleon watched the progress of the blind giant and met him with a running leap that placed both of his feet in Apis’s face.

The big man stumbled back, regained his balance and bellowed, “Where are you? I’m gonna kill you when I find out”.

Napoleon braced himself and answered, “Here I am, Apis, right in front of you. Come and get me.”

Apis charged and Napoleon swung to one side, kicking the running giant just above the ankle. Both of his feet knocked from under him, Apis spun and flew, hitting the deck face first. He rolled over himself, snapping his head full around; Napoleon was mentally counting him out when the giant struggled back to his feet.

“That’s funny, it’s supposed to be the bigger they are the harder they fall,” Napoleon muttered.

“Solo, is that you?” Apis asked, not really believing he was going to get the chance to repay Napoleon for the dunking he had received earlier.

“It’s me, all right. What’s keeping you up?” Napoleon delivered another kick, this time to the solar plexus. Apis batted aside the foot and sent Napoleon sprawling. Following the sound of the U.N.C.L.E. agent, Apis walked right into a double handed blow that nearly fractured Napoleon’s knuckles. Apis grinned and slammed out with both fists. The wall behind Napoleon vibrated and cracked from the force of the double blow.

Napoleon realized that the fight was using up precious minutes. Illya would probably appreciate a bit more help than was being offered in handling Porpoise and the rest of the Thrushes trapped in the darkened space house.

“Come on, chum,” he directed Apis; “let’s get out into the light were we can see what’s happening.”

Apis was quite happy to fight it out in the dark, but if Napoleon wanted to go to where there was light, Apis would follow. Napoleon talked and taunted Apis back toward the opening to the Spaceship Room.

“Stand still, Solo. I wanta break you in two,” Apis bellowed at the specter before him.

“I’m standing still, chum. Come on ahead.”

“You promise, you aren’t going to dodge me?”

“Why should I lie?”

Apis lowered his head and charged. Napoleon brought both fists up from the floor in a reverse pile-driver blow that straightened the giant out. Apis, still rushing, felt as if his nose had been smashed. Napoleon dropped backward, lifting his feet into the giant’s gut, and sailed him on over, through the broken spacelock and into the maze beyond.

The crash following bespoke the loss of at least two more mirrors and parts of the Space display. Napoleon felt even more confident in counting Apis out as he raced along the dark corridors to his partner’s aid.

Apis dragged himself out of the wreckage and stumbled around the room. He found the Spacelock by pure chance and fell back through the opening. He pulled open a locker and emptied it out onto the floor. By feel he found and donned a strange three-lensed contraption with twin horns looping up from behind. He flicked a switch, and the two infrared beams over his head came to life. The room, viewed through the lenses of the Thrush night-sight helmet, seemed to be fully lit.

Apis clutched one of the legs of a nearby stool, and by twisting it once, ripped it loose. He swung it once to check the balance, and then set out after Napoleon.

The U.N.C.L.E. agent, after making a couple of wrong turns, found himself coming into the radio room. The extensive electronics and the carpeted floor acted as heat dampers. Despite his goggles, much of the room was too dimly lit to see. He slowly felt his way forward, step by step; the only sounds he heard were those of his own breathing. Part of the room glowed and slowly dimmed as the heat beam traveled on.

Suddenly he heard a half-animal growl and heavy footsteps behind him. Napoleon spun, to see the indestructible Apis charging, his short club raised to strike. The U.N.C.L.E. agent dived across a flat table covered with tools and rolled to safety beyond as Apis smashed the club into the shadows.

The eerie glow wavered, rising as the beams from Apis's headpiece struck, and falling off as the room sucked away the heat. Apis charged again, and Napoleon met the flashing club with a metal stool. Apis missed his target and struck a metal rung with his wrist. The stool, bent and warped, was tom from Napoleon's grip, while Apis raised the club for a second blow. Napoleon brought his right fist up to the giant's jaw, and then danced aside.

Apis checked for a moment, and then swung around to pin the U.N.C.L.E. agent in the twin beams. Solo backed slowly away, taking on a karate stance. The giant stepped forward and brought the club full around. Napoleon wavered back and then forward. He put one hand under the giant's elbow as the club passed and swung a foot between the spread legs. A lift and swing, and Apis, already off balance, crashed backwards through the matched radios. Napoleon brought a tapedeck down on the giant's head, and repeated the blow as Apis tried to shake free. The twin infrared beams went out, Napoleon struck twice more, and Apis slumped back, unconscious.

"Very good, Solo," Arnold said from the doorway. "Now all you have to face is me."

The small Thrush was also wearing one of the night-sight helmets. In one hand he carried a slender wand, in the other a light cloth. Napoleon dropped the shattered tape transport on slumbering Apis, and turned to face his new foe.

"You've got to be kidding, Arnold," Napoleon said with a smile. "After that, you ought to be a vacation." He leaped forward as he spoke, and the small Thrush drifted to one side in a perfect Veronica. Napoleon reached out to grasp his foe and the slender rod spoke. It hummed as Arnold spun it through the air and it popped once as he touched Napoleon on the right wrist. The wrist bone cracked on impact, and a numbing pain ran up Napoleon's arm.

Arnold stepped forward and tapped Napoleon twice on the side with the humming wand. Two ribs cracked from the blows. The U.N.C.L.E. agent

fell back as Arnold pressed on across the room, the wand in his hand humming like a wasp, and striking like a hawk.

Napoleon reached down and grasped Apis's impromptu club. He swung it forward, taking on a fencing stance. Arnold's wand hummed and danced, and Napoleon thrust and parried in a counter. The pain in his side and wrist was nothing to the concentration he was putting into stopping that deadly little wand.

With a shift of tactics, Arnold flicked the cloth toward Napoleon's eyes. He caught the cloth on his make-do foil, and Arnold slashed forward with the wand. The stool-leg club vibrated, stung Napoleon's fingers, and flew across the | room. Napoleon feinted to follow, and, as Arnold countered, struck with his damaged hand. The blow was too light; Arnold fell back and then slashed out with the spinning wand again.

Napoleon gave way, step by step. Finally his back was to the wall, and Arnold smiled as he spun the wand toward the U.N.C.L.E. agent's face.

Using the wall as a brace, Napoleon kicked out, catching Arnold low. The little Thrush staggered back, but regained his offensive position instantly. Napoleon's hand darted down to the calf of his wetsuit and came up with a slender blade. Arnold brought the wand up, and Napoleon flipped the little knife across at him.

Arnold screamed and collapsed, the knife quivering in his knee, splitting the cap.

"So help me, I'm going to spend a week in bed when this is all over," Napoleon muttered as he slumped down next to the two unconscious Thrushes.

Chapter 15

“I do believe you’re upset with me”

BULLHORN at the ready, Matt waited for Napoleon’s signal. The watch on his wrist read fifteen to, and all of the lights on the pier flickered and went out. The U.N.C.L.E. assault squad went into flawless action. Two portable spot lights flashed on, bathing the open pier with light from two angles. Four armored vehicles pulled out onto the beach and arranged themselves in skirmish formation facing the fun house. Their headlights finished the lighting and not a shadow remained unplumbed.

“All right, we know you’re in there,” Matt’s voice echoed through the bullhorn. “Let’s make this as easy as possible on all of us.”

There was no response from the Space House, no sign of life, no sound.

“Avery Porpoise, send your men out with their hands raised,” Matt called out, and then repeated. There still was no response. The U.N.C.L.E. agents pulled forward, expecting to be ordered to invade.

Matt lowered the bullhorn and signaled a squad leader forward. The two agents were picking out objectives for the attacking squad when the first sign of life appeared. Three figures in black, their hands raised, and all laughing, danced out of the entrance to the Space House.

“We surrender,” their leader shouted, as she broke into a dance. Mal and the boys had made it through the maze. Noting Mai’s new step, one foot free to dance wildly, the other dragging behind, the two boys fell in.

“Allee allee in free! We’re doing the ‘Bird’, the ‘Jailbird,”’ Andy shouted as he picked up an imaginary ball and chain on his leg and started dribbling the ball.

The U.N.C.L.E. agents dropped their jaws, and lowered their guns in disbelief. They had all tangled with Thrush before, but never with Thrushes quite like these. “You three kids get down and out of the way,” Matt ordered over the loud hailer. “You on the inside, come out with your hands raised.”

The flower children continued to dance, Mal putting all the curves of her healthy young body into her newly invented “Jailbird.” None of the U.N.C.L.E. agents noticed, until three Thrushes grabbed the children, that three more figures had come out of the maze.

“All right,” the self-styled leader of the three thugs commanded, “open up and let us through, or well kill the—whooof!”

It’s doubtful that “whoof” was really the intended target of the threat, but Mal’s elbow shooting into the thug’s diaphragm made any other pronouncement impossible. His lungs emptied, and instant unconsciousness followed. Andy stomped the instep of the Thrush holding him and gained release. He then double-teamed the thug holding Charlie. The two boys soon had that situation in hand; one of them wrapped himself around the thug’s legs, the other sat on his chest and arms and smashed his head into the ground.

Mai, in the meantime, wasn’t letting the third thug go unnoticed. He was just getting over his sore foot when the girl grabbed him by the ears and yanked his head down, to smash his nose on her forehead. She brought her knee up sharply between his legs, and left him curled in a fetal position.

Then, as if they had choreographed it, the three flower children fell back into the comic steps of the “Jailbird.”

Thrush bullets spat from the loading door, and Matt and the squad leader reacted instantly. Matt leaped, picked up Mal in one arm, snagged Charlie with his free hand and yanked the two to relative safety. Andy was plucked into the air and carried to the skirmish line by the second agent. U.N.C.L.E. returned fire with a vengeance, and two Thrushes tumbled out of cover. The firing let up and Matt scrambled to his feet, discovering he still had an armful of Mal.

“Are you a spy, too?” she cooed, kissing him on the forehead. “I just love spies.” Matt reluctantly disentangled and picked up the abandoned loud hailer.

“Come on out with your hands raised. You haven’t got a chance. We have the exits covered, and were ready to shoot if we have to, so let’s make it easy. He repeated this several times and then ordered his men into the attack.

Bullets flew, and four of the Thrushes tried to make a way over the side of the pier. They fell into the waiting firenets of U.N.C.L.E. and were wrapped up and put away with no trouble at all.

Inside the darkened pool room, Illya stopped to orient himself. The muggy heat of the room gave all surfaces a strange unshadowed appearance. Next to the pool* a darker blob stood out as the only cool thing in the room. The blob moved, and Illya raised his U.N.C.L.E. Special to cover Avery Porpoise.

“Stand very still, Mr. Porpoise,” the Russian said, moving constantly to keep the fat man from pinpointing the source of his voice. “We have your little place surrounded, and I have a pistol pointed at your fat little tummy.”

“My, Mr. Kuryakin,” Porpoise answered in a conversational tone, “you U.N.C.L.E. people are quite talented. I presume Mr. Solo is behind all this. I knew once he had effected his escape that I would have to leave my little retreat, but I must admit I doubted he could work up any sort of annoyance for me in so short a time. And you, Mr. Kuryakin, you appear to be able to walk through walls and see in the dark. Yes, you U.N.C.L.E. people are very talented.” Porpoise, under cover of his monologue, finished adjusting the straps and zippers of his wetsuit. Illya, circling wide to avoid the pool, kept continual watch on the dark blob.

“You had better step back from the pool’s edge, Mr. Porpoise. You’re right, I can see in the dark, and as I’ve mentioned, I’m aiming a pistol right at you. I’m not at all sure just what kind of ammunition I was provided with; it may only be mercy bullets, or it may be the real tiling. If you do what I say, neither of us will be forced to find out.”

He had brought himself to within a dozen feet of the fat villain. The deceptive shadowy quality of the cool rubber suit kept him from really seeing what Porpoise was about.

“Oh dear,” Porpoise continued as he edged closer to the pool. “I do believe you’re upset with me over that little conversation we had earlier. Really, Mr. Kuryakin, there was no offense offered there. It’s just that I was in something of a hurry, and you U.N.C.L.E. people, among your other qualities, are noted for your lack of cooperation when being put to the question.”

“It wasn’t a matter of faith,” Illya corrected. “And I don’t hold it against you personally; it’s just that despite having broken your crossword code, it turns out we will need you to add the corroborative evidence against the five thousand or so people you have buying and selling Breelen’s common.” He was within three steps of Porpoise now.

“You lied to me about the crossword.” Porpoise sounded crestfallen. “You really do seem to have the upper hand. You can see in the dark, you have a gun, and you’ve broken my code. I must admit that compared to all this I can do very little. But there is one thing I can do.

“What is that?” Illya asked as he placed one hand on the fat man’s shoulder.

“This,” Porpoise answered as he twisted from Illya’s grip and plunged into the pool.

The U.N.C.L.E. agent swung his pistol to follow the fat form. What does he think he’s doing? He can’t stay down forever, even with a re-breather, and even if he could we could always drain the pool.

The water splashed and rolled, showing activity below, but Porpoise failed to resurface. Illya peered into the pool to try and catch a glimpse of his quarry, but the infrared goggles caught the heat radiated from the pool’s surface, and gave^ it the appearance of a glowing, molten bath.

The activity ceased and the water settled. Illya completed a circuit of the pool, failing to spot any sign of the fat man. Tucking the U.N.C.L.E. Special in his belt, he dived into the pool, prepared to drag his prey out by his rolls of fat.

The pool was empty.

Illya dived twice more, doubting his senses. No matter what pattern he searched, there was no one in the pool. His searching fingers touched a wheel. Instantly he surfaced,

took several deep breaths followed by a shallow taking of air, and dived back to the same spot.

He turned the wheel and opened a circular door. Below there was an opening; the warm water kept him from seeing anything at all inches from his nose, so he dived deeper to search the opening out. A second wheel, six feet below, turned easily in his grip. Suddenly it was torn from him as he and the tons of water above were flushed through the open lock into the ocean below. Illya spun and bounced in the massive current. He slammed into a huge metal eggshelllike covering. He spun, senses blurry, and was swept down the metal egg and slammed into the ocean bed.

Porpoise, swimming up under the empty shell, was in a panic. His submersible craft gone, U.N.C.L.E. surrounding the pier, he was lost. The sudden blast of water from above shook the ovoid hangar, but the eddy pocket of water around him wasn’t disturbed. The thundrous noise of the swimming pool emptying into the sea shocked him back to sanity, and when he saw the limp form of Illya pounded into the sea floor his mind came up with a rational plan.

First he must kill the unfortunate Kuryakin, then he could swim at right angles to the pier until he was beyond U.N.C.L.E/s cordon. Without him, U.N.C.L.E. would have no case against the Thrushes actually involved in the buying and selling of Breelen s. He resolved not to be taken alive; even in death he would win. For U.N.C.L.E. couldn’t reverse what had already passed, and Thrush already owned more than a third of Breelen’s.

Illya, dazed and needing air, drifted up from the ocean floor. Instinct kept him from letting out any of the precious oxygen he had stored up before his spectacular exploration of the deeps.

Porpoise hit him across the back, trying to knock out of him what little air he might still hold. Illya reacted slowly, spinning to face the fat frogman. Porpoise drew him in as a mother might her child, hugging the Russian to him, trying to smother him in fat as well as drown him in water. Illya brought an elbow up, knocking Porpoise's mask askew. Cold brine filled the mask, and his eyes. He released the weakened agent to clear his mask, and Illya struggled feebly for the surface.

Matt and an assault squad and three energetic flower children hit the loading door in a rush. The dozen Thrushes inside put up a short battle, but fell to the withering fire of the U.N.C.L.E. agents. Mal liberated a Thrush repeating rifle and smashed it over a would-be Thrush hero shouting, "No war toys!" Andy and Charlie took up the chant, and the three seemingly bulletproof flower children routed the last of the Thrush.

"What are you doing here?" Matt roared, his voice without the bullhorn hardly a decibel less loud than with it.

"Napoleon said we should get out and stick with you" Mal answered innocently. "Besides, we're native guides, and we work real cheap."

The three set out after the retreating Thrushes. Gunfire from outside attested that the fight was far from over. Matt shrugged and sped after the three children, wondering how he was going to phrase this development in his report on the evening's action.

The gang of Thrushes trying a sortie from the maze entrance were driven back to cover by U.N.C.L.E/s rear guard. The darkness of the maze, plus the dangers of the outside, had just about convinced them to surrender. From behind, lights appeared, and Matt and a part of the assault squad with miner's lights on their heads filled a myriad of mirrors.

"I told you," Charlie exulted. "That door had to lead to the maze, or there wouldn't have been so many baddies around to pop off." Matt

collected up a dispirited group of Thrushes and passed them on to the men outside, then he and his group with Charlie went to meet the group following Mal and Andy. The flower children led the agents quickly through the confusing maze, with no false steps or turns, into the Spaceship Room, and through the open spacelock to the corridors beyond.

Shots echoed ahead, and the group broke into a run. Rounding a turn, they spilled into the pool room, to view the disarming of the remaining Thrushes. Mal and Andy were doing the “Jailbird” to entertain the captured Thrushes. Charlie joined the others with a rebel yell and leaped into the pool. Instead of the expected splash, there was a crash and a yell of laughter as the boy scrambled back out. “Hey, somebody drained the pool. What kind of hospitality is that?”

A panel swung open in the wall, all lights in the room swung to pinpoint the action, and Napoleon staggered into the room, dragging Arnold in his good hand. “Here’s one more for you, Matt, and there’s another inside.”

“Hey, look,” Andy shouted. “Napoleon took Arnold, and HI bet Apis is the other one. Nobody can beat our favorite spy!” Napoleon smiled at the accolade, and scanned the room.

“Where are Illya and Porpoise?” he asked as he collapsed from the pain of his broken ribs.

Illya was taking in long deep pulls of life-giving air under the pier with Porpoise racing to the surface below. The fat shark grabbed an ankle and yanked the Russian under, and Illya stopped breathing instantly; his reaction to water honed by Apis earlier kept him from a lungful of brine. He twisted full length and seized the diving mask and pulled. Water spilling in over his face blinded Porpoise for a second time, but he held tightly to the Russian, pulling him down as he rose to the surface himself.

Porpoise sucked in the night air and pulled the struggling agent into his soft stomach. Illya, breath nearly gone, kicked out and struck a piling. Using the piling and its barnacles for footholds, he lifted the two of them out of the water, and broke the fat man’s grip.

Porpoise panicked again. The fight was going wrong. Even in his own element, where he should have had the U.N.C.L.E. agent at a disadvantage, he wasn't winning. The fat man fled into the sea, his flippered feet giving his kicks great thrusting power.

Illya gasped in badly needed air, and followed, not gaining, not losing ground. His lack of fins was perfectly matched by the huge cross section Porpoise had to drive through the water. Both men were forced to stay near the surface for air, although Porpoise could have cleared his mask again had he dared take the time.

Ultimately, Illya's greater endurance proved to be the difference. He drew closer and then pulled alongside. Porpoise was straining in panic flight, but again, when stimulated from outside, snapped back to instant rationality. When Illya seized him the fat man dived and twisted, bringing his flippered feet up into the Russian s face. He kicked hard and fled to the depths.

With cool precision he re-donned his mask and cleared it in time to receive Illya's charge. He easily dodged the grab for the mask, and again pulled the Russian into his arms. This time there would be no hurry, no pushing. He would simply hold the Russian under for ten minutes or so, and then be on his way.

Illya, wondering disgustedly why he let Porpoise do this to him three times running, opened his mouth and closed it again, taking as large a bite out of the rubber and fat as he was able. Porpoise squealed with the pain as the Russian chewed his way through the wetsuit and through his stomach.

Overhead the platform of knives offered Porpoise a solution. He would hang the Russian on one or more of the blades; it didn't really matter how he died. Porpoise kicked strongly to raise them back to the surface.

Illya, blacking out from lack of air, felt his struggles grow weaker. He spat out the mouthful of Porpoise and tried to twist around. Passing his face he saw a pair of U.N.C.L.E. swim fins. As if in a dream he reached out and took hold of one of the fins. It hung up on the blade it was hanging from, and the two men swung around the blade in a large circle.

Porpoise felt the first blade enter him in total disbelief. He dropped the limp Russian and tried to back off the blade in his shoulder. The second knife entered in his lower back, I and he rocked back and forth trying to free himself-but he .was slowly driving one and then the other into his vitals.

The absurd humor of losing his life to such a fluke set him laughing, and he finished in hysterics, confident that despite not living to enjoy the fruits of his work, he had still beaten U.N.C.L.E.

Chapter 16

“We’re the Urban Renewal”

“HEY, LOOK AT THAT. The Soldier in White!”

Napoleon came up out of a sedative sleep for the third time that day, and decided maybe he was hallucinating. The voice was Andy’s but the face leaning over him was carefully barbered and rode above a gold and red vest and pin-striped black shirt.

“Don’t go back to sleep, man. We’ve been waiting half an hour for you to come to. They said we could come in a minute ago, and here you’re trying to sack out again.”

“Napoleon, please wake up.” He forced his eyes open and turned towards his window. Framed against the late morning sunlight was Malista, her hair sculptured in a mass of Helen of Troy ringlets, twined with miniature orchids. She was wearing bell-bottoms and a clinging top, all in radiant white, with her clay medallion riding proudly on her bodice.

“You are a picture in three-dee,” said Charlie from the foot of the bed. “A better ad for Johnson & Johnson I never saw.” Charlie himself was a picture, with one American Beauty rose hanging where a watch fob should be. He lounged against the wall in Seville Row gray flannel, a snappy bowler pushed back on his gold locks. Napoleon came wide awake, but found himself speechless at the change in the flower children. He just lay there, looking from one to another of them and smiling broadly. Finally the three of them broke into laughter with him, but they all stopped when he laughed once and collapsed under the pain.

“I guess this is the first time I’ve tried to laugh since last night.” he whispered, trying not to disturb his broken ribs.

At that they all laughed again. Mal wiped his forehead, almost the only part of him that wasn't bandaged, and handed him water with a flexible straw. "It wasn't last night, Napoleon. They got you into Emergency about 5:00 A.M., and started snipping and sewing. You were kept unconscious for two nights, Wednesday and Thursday. Today is Friday, and it's almost noon."

"Clay lies still," said Andy.

Napoleon looked at him, and looked down at his cast, the plaster around his ribs, and the multitude of places where bandages covered cuts, bums and abrasions. "Nobody likes a smart kid," he said. "Not even a smart literate kid. Where did you pick up Housman, anyway?"

"Mr. Waverly reads Housman, and he let me look at *A Shropshire Lad* while Mal and Charlie were arguing about our contract with the whole staff of top brass from the Masked Club yesterday."

"All Andy had to do was sign; it's pretty finky, letting us do all the haggling about money."

"Money? Contract? Do you three own the Masked Club now, too?"

"Nope. We're just their star routine," said Mal smugly. "Some bunch of stars," interjected Andy. "We come on between acts and stomp up a little adrenalin in the crowd." Napoleon closed his eyes and tried to envision it. A sultry torch-singer goes off left, to bored applause, the lights go up, and-

"The three of you come on doing rough-and-tumble, challenging anyone in the house to two falls out of three. Does the Masked Club have a police permit to put on a show featuring three deadly weapons?"

"Naw, you got it by the wrong end. We sing a little, Charlie improvises on the guitar, Mal does some dancing to my drums, that's all. We're folk-rock artists. You know the Jefferson Airplane, the Strawberry Alarm Clock, the Blues Project?"

"Not personally," Napoleon said.

“Well, we’re the Urban Renewal. We sing songs from the IRA and the Civil War, like Goober Peas. Maybe we a cappella something.”

“Gregorian chants,” suggested Napoleon.

Charlie brightened up. “I bet with some sock-dollager rehearsing we could sneak one in. Only backwards, with sitar accompaniment.” He grinned, leaned forward and tapped on the foot of the bed to lead his troupe.

“No, no!” cried Napoleon, remembering just in time not to breathe too deeply. “This is a hospital room. They insist on quiet here, and I’m not ready to hold a lease-breaking party just yet.”

“Well,” said Mal, “maybe we can have it ready for tonight. We’re going on at 9:30 for ten minutes, and Mr. Waverly said we might even get it on closed-channel to your tv set here.”

“I’ll keep the volume ‘way down. Do you go on in those costumes?”

“Costumes?” asked Andy, looking down at his dark purple slacks. “These are street-wear, man. When we come up outa that wilderness to find somebody paying for our steak and beer, we went out and bought some in-type clothes. For the show, Charlie and I slip into matching union suits with measles on ‘em, and Mal wears this psychedelic muu-muu, with flair.”

“Mal seems to be wearing the outfit she has on now with considerable flair. Your hair is very lovely up, Mai.”

“Thank you,” she said, beaming at him. He reached out his good arm to take her hand. “I can have it down, for the show, just by taking out this headband of orchids. It takes a while to do up again, though, or I’d-” She was interrupted by the entrance of Illya Kuryakin and Beth Gottsendt.

“We didn’t know you had company,” said Beth.

“Oh, we were just leaving,” replied Mal.

“There’s no need for that,” said Napoleon. Illya started to say something, but decided against it. The girls looked each other over, while their audience looked from one to the other. Mal didn’t let go of Napoleon’s hand, but let her eyes travel right up from the floor over Beth’s smart tweed suit and modest jewelry. Beth swept her eyes from Mai’s orchid-filled hair down to flowered sandals, and slowly back up the well-filled pantssuit to the Greek girl’s face. Neither girl said a word, neither girl quite believing that the other could offer much in competition, but both fully aware that competition was there.

Illya, noting with amusement his partner’s growing social discomfort, finally broke the silence: “Beth called for you yesterday, and since you were ‘out’ I took the call. The doctor said you would be ‘in’ about now. Since all you can do is look anyway, and you’ve always told me that where looking is concerned ‘the more the merrier,’ I figured you wouldn’t mind having two pretty girls come see you at the same time.”

The girls exchanged grins as Napoleon closed his eyes and tried to sink through the bed. “Besides,” Illya continued, “I thought you would want to know how our little tea party came out.” Napoleon opened his eyes again and groaned as he tried to pull himself up. Both girls were instantly at his side, easing him back down to a more comfortable position.

Illya grinned, and went on. “I lost Porpoise to some knives, and it turned out he carried all his records in his head. We were just about where we started in saving Breelen’s until Charlie here suggested we carry on the good work.” The flower child in question pulled the paisley handkerchief from his pocket and waved it to the adoring crowds.

“Yesterday we contacted Breelen’s, and, after plucking a Thrush from their midst, convinced them to sell all the stock they had at the prevailing market. Porpoise’s short sales from the day before held the market up for a bit, but the bottom soon fell out. Breelen’s dropped from sixty-two to five in one day. Then Crypto and I sat up all night working on this.” Illya opened the newspaper in his pocket to the crossword puzzle.

“You’ll notice it’s signed Avery D. Porpoise. It also has all three of the key definitions, and the instructions to ‘sell’ at ‘six and three-eighths.’

Breelen's spent the day buying the flood of Thrush stock, and when I left the market this afternoon they had regained all the stock they had lost in the manipulations and a small margin over. Of course the price is still down from what it should be, but now that Thrush is no longer in the picture things will get back to normal in a month or so."

Charlie pulled a large gold turnip watch from his vest and announced, "Hey, we got to flit if we're going to make the first show." He and Andy arose, and, bidding the soldier in white goodbye, stepped into the hall.

"I've got to go too, Napoleon," Mal said, as she rose to leave.

"Beth, would you care to have dinner at the Masked Club, and take in the hottest new group in town?" Illya asked in his most courtly style. Mal smiled at the compliment. Beth nodded her approval of the plan and Illya offered her one arm, offering the other to Mal.

"Hey, what about me?" Napoleon asked, as everyone prepared to leave.

"This is for you, old chum," said Illya, placing the open newspaper on Napoleon's chest. "Work it in good health." The three left the room, leaving Napoleon staring blankly at the crossword that had solved the case.